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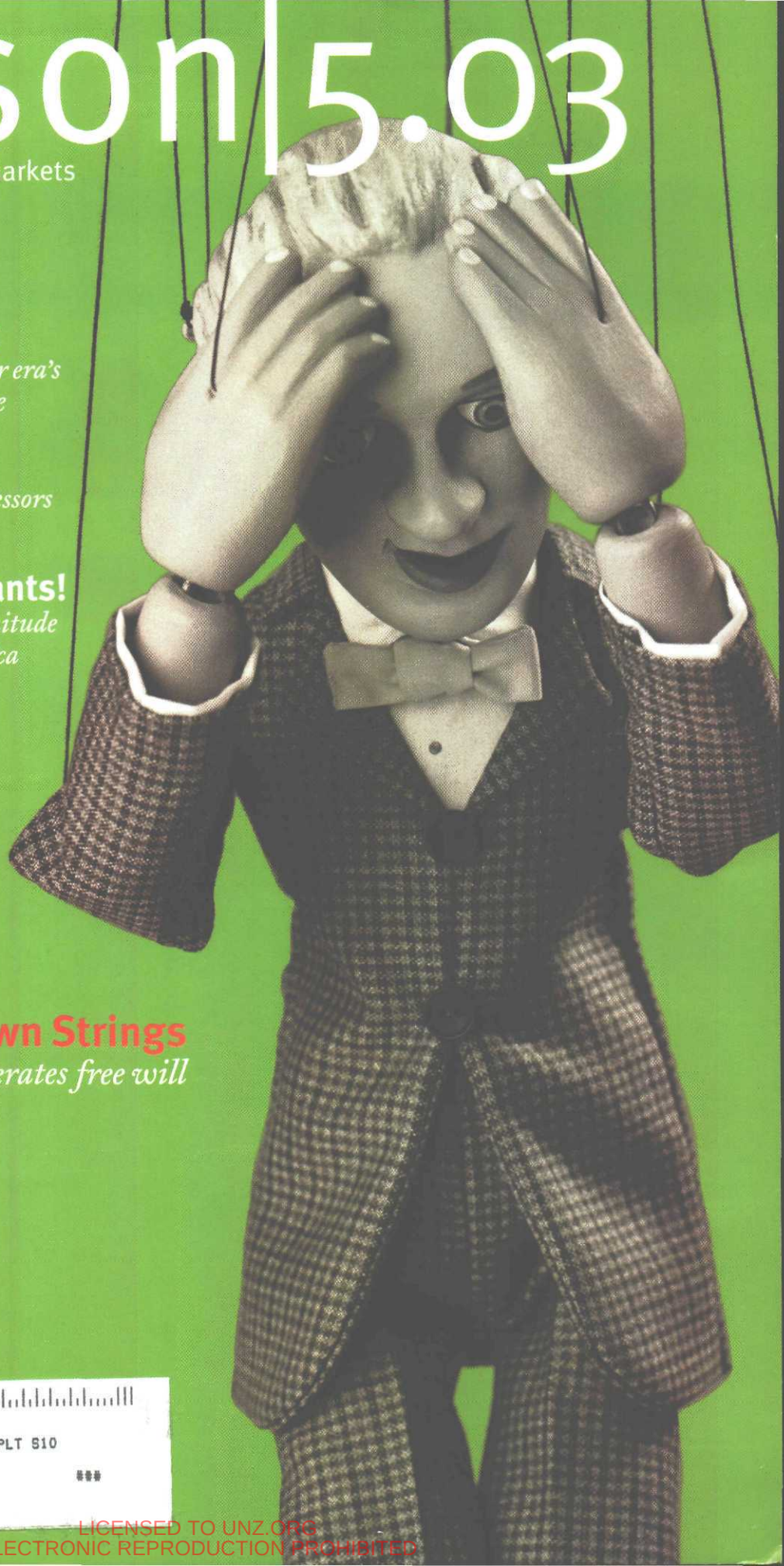

Velvet President
Why Vaclav Havel is our era's George Orwell and more

Skin Flicks 101
What porn studies professors don't get about sex

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Marvel comics and plenitude in contemporary America

Pulling Our Own Strings
How evolution generates free will

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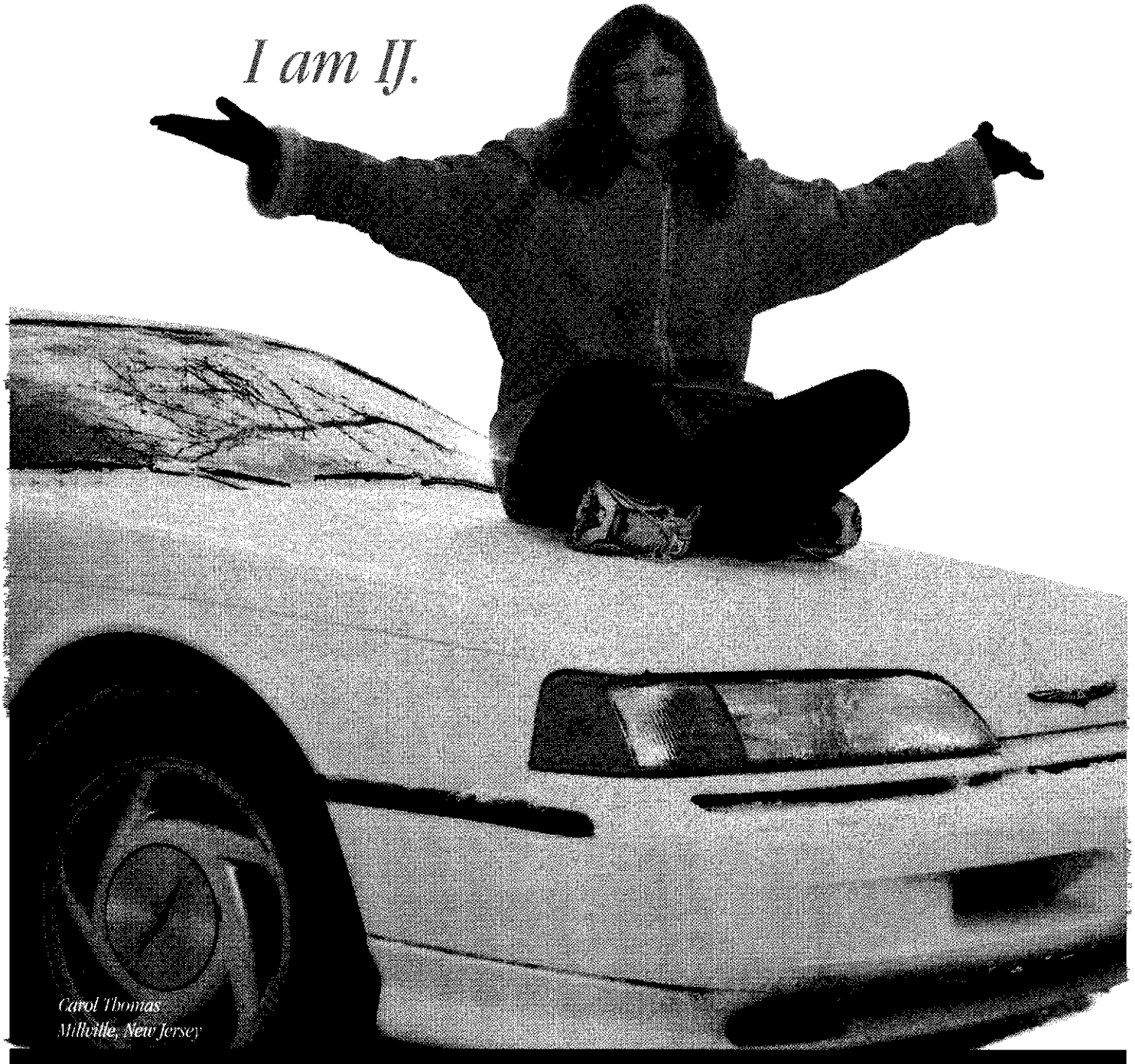

Carol Thomas
Millville, New Jersey

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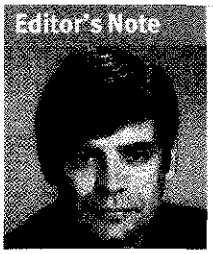
Editor's Note



Human Choice Machines

"Is all that we see or seem/But a dream within a dream?"—Edgar Allan Poe

NOT LONG AFTER my first encounter with the great, insane Poe, I began to separate the world into two kinds of people: those who have entertained the notion that they have been *dreamed* by someone or something else, and those who have not. I confess I find the former group far more interesting than the latter.

If nothing else, the first set of folks is likely to indulge a taste not only for Poe but also for Philip K. Dick and a host of other writers who explore unnerving questions about free will and determinism—of how we can know that our actions are really our own and that we're not simply being led about by other people, the random firing of synapses, or evolutionary imperatives that leave little room for such quaint notions as human agency and autonomy.

In its adolescent forms, this is the stuff of long, late-night bull sessions fueled by booze, coffee, and other drugs, but it's not simply a stoner's game. It gets at a paradox of the Enlightenment discourses that still infuse our world. Even as the Enlightenment helped usher in an age of political self-determination, it also underwrote a continuing investigation into how human behavior is heavily—perhaps even decisively—shaped by all sorts of factors, including biology, psychology, sociology, and more. In the end, we all have to ask, are we simply puppets whose strings are being pulled by unseen forces?

Our cover story, an interview with the controversial philosopher Daniel Dennett, speaks directly to this question ("Pulling Our Own Strings," page 24). "People confuse determinism with fatalism," explains Dennett, author of the new book *Freedom Evolves*. While "fatalism is the idea that something's going to happen no matter what you do," determinism is the idea that what you do depends on your knowledge and your values. In Dennett's provocative view, we are wired by evolution to be "choice machines" that are relatively free to choose actions based on our values and our knowledge of likely outcomes.

Other stories in this issue also analyze human choice machines, albeit in different ways. Associate Editor Jesse Walker's "Inside the Spiritual Jacuzzi" (page 32) is a tour of new customized religions that range from attempts to fuse Judaism with Buddhism to neopaganism to something called the Hot Tub Mystery Religion. What these new faiths share with each other—and with established religions—is a desire for personal meaning and community.

Matt Welch's essay on the just-retired Vaclav Havel pays tribute to one of the great figures in the struggle against communism ("Velvet President," page 42). First as a writer who stared down a repressive state and then as the improbable president of the Czech Republic, Havel has lived the sort of bizarre, triumphant life that almost makes us think we *must* be dreaming. Yet in his case, unlike in Poe's, the dream is nothing less than inspiring.

Nick Gillespie

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Julian Sanchez

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Tim Cavanaugh

Gumshoe weblogger JULIAN SANCHEZ explains how "dilettante swarms" on the Net, himself among them, quickly unraveled a gun research riddle and solved "The Mystery of Mary Rosh" (page 16). Sanchez, who works as a staff writer and researcher at a Washington, D.C.–based think tank, admits having had a "gotcha moment" when he first made his chuckle-inducing discovery that gun scholar John Lott's biggest online fan was, indeed, John Lott, writing under a female pseudonym. Uncharacteristically self-effacing for a blogger, Sanchez describes his *Notes from the Underground* (accessible at www.juliansanchez.com/notes.html) as "a collection of political commentary, philosophical BS, and personal details, probably uninteresting to 99 percent of those who look at them."

With April 15 in sight, LEIGH JENCO takes on the argument that without taxation, property rights could not exist ("Property Wrongs," page 58). Has she ever had to duke things out with the taxman, too? "Fortunately, I don't make enough money for the IRS to pick on me," says Jenco, a doctoral candidate in political theory at the University of Chicago. "Yet somehow, I always seem to owe at the end of the year." The Pittsburgh native has spent time living and studying in China, and plans to return there in 2004 to begin researching her dissertation on neo-Confucian individualism.

reason Web Editor TIM CAVANAUGH is pleased to announce that in February, **reason online** logged yet another record-breaking month, topping out at 658,000 visits—a 40 percent increase in traffic since September 2002. Quips Cavanaugh, who joined the staff last August, "It's either the growing popularity of laissez-faire, post-state principles, or my promise of a free toaster with every page view." It may also have something to do with *Hit & Run*, **reason**'s popular staff blog that debuted in December, online at www.reason.com/hitandrun/. In this issue, Cavanaugh takes a break from writing for the Web to write *about* a Web magazine, the defunct dot-com glossy *The Industry Standard* ("Standard Issue," page 61).

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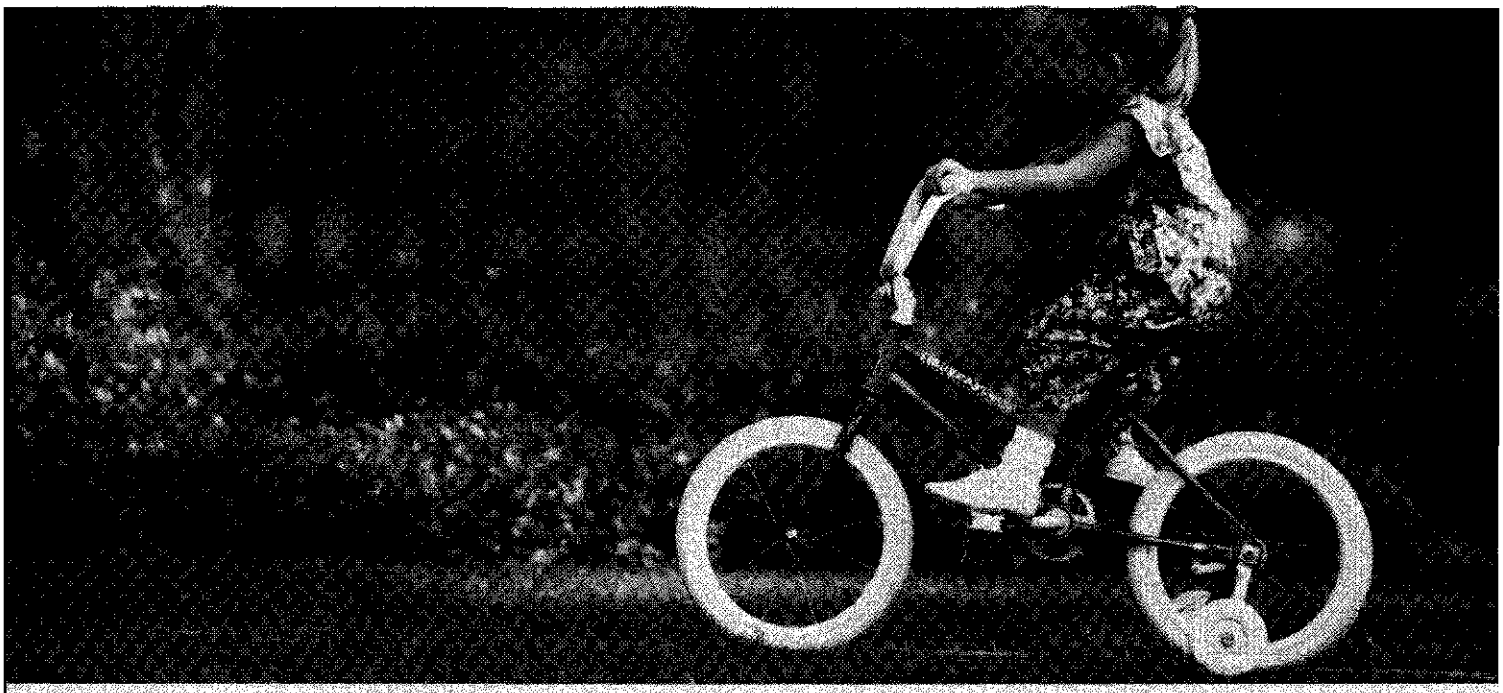

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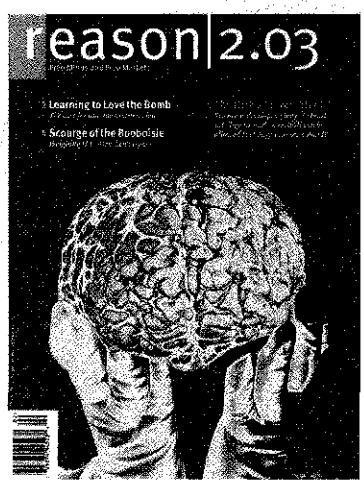

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Brain Chemistry

Ronald Bailey's "The Battle for Your Brain" (February) seemed more like a persuasive pill popping agenda than an article. Evidently, in the future, the avant-garde population will be popping pills for memory and intellectual enhancement. We can dispense with that old-fashioned humanity of self-will, self-awareness, self-discipline, and self-control in favor of *drugs*. That must delight the billion-dollar pharmaceutical companies. Did Bailey figure out the cost over one's life span?

Dorothy J. Caruso
Balboa Island, CA

In his otherwise excellent article, Ronald Bailey glosses over one of the most important real-world concerns of neuroethics: the danger that neurological enhancements will become difficult to refuse. Bailey attempts to refute this with two arguments: 1) improved brainpower won't necessarily lead to success, and 2) higher education also increases brainpower, and nobody's limiting access to that.

The first argument is clearly irrelevant. Whatever drive, ambition, or other personality characteristics one has, increased brainpower is almost certain to increase one's chances of success in any but the most mindless pursuits. In my opinion, merely this increased chance will lead to huge demand for brain-enhancing drugs.

The second argument misses the point that popping a pill will be far, far easier than pursuing an advanced degree. Let's say a recent high school graduate has two options that will increase brainpower equally: pop a pill once a day, or earn a four-year college degree. Which will he choose?

There is a clear parallel that helps illustrate my points: anabolic steroids. Drawing a parallel to Bailey's first argument, millions of student athletes have used steroids to increase strength, despite the fact that they are illegal and dangerous. Only a tiny fraction of them will reach the professional ranks, much less become superstars. That does not stop them, however, from responding to competitive pressure on their own, smaller battlefields.

To draw a parallel to Bailey's second argument, I have spent 20 years building a top-notch physique without using steroids. (I am a fitness trainer and bodybuilder.) A complete beginner could surpass me in less than six months by using steroids. If they were legal, cheap, and had no side effects, which option would be more rational?

The debate becomes interesting if one assumes that neurological drugs will have dangerous side effects (as virtually all drugs do). If so, the government may very well have an interest in controlling these drugs, as with anabolic steroids. Of course, one could argue that dangerous drugs should be legal, but that an argument different from Bailey's.

Peter Bell
Colorado Springs, CO

Wrecks and Renewal

In "Wrecking Property Rights" (February), Sam Staley does a nice job in showing the dangers of eminent domain when government overreaches. But the examples he gives pale in comparison to the deliberate and wholesale destruction of ethnic neighborhoods in major cities by federal planners in the period after World War II, under the guise of "urban renewal."

This sordid chapter of American history isn't taught in schools. But it is fully articulated in *The Slaughter of the Cities: Urban Renewal as Ethnic Cleansing*, by E. Michael Jones. Focusing

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on four cities—Boston, Philadelphia, Detroit, and Chicago—Jones proves that the destruction of ethnic neighborhoods was not a case of good intentions gone bad but rather was the intent of the undertaking from the very start.

This book is not conspiracy theory run amok but documented research of the highest order. The abuse of government trust here should be of great concern to all libertarians. For me, the interest is more personal. I always wondered what destroyed my 1950–'60s Irish-Italian neighborhood outside of Newark, New Jersey. Now I know.

Peter Kenny Skurkiss
Chester Township, NJ

Sam Staley's piece is an interesting and fair one. As a practicing planner, I'm going to seek out his book *Smarter Growth*. I think there is one irony worth mentioning: The rise in private-to-private takings may be an unintended consequence of the thinking that brought us "regulatory takings," that mysterious beast that the Rehnquist Supreme Court cooked up in the 1980s.

For 1,000 years, "takings" referred to the government's coming to be the owner of a piece of property. But with the decision handed down in *Lucas v. South Carolina Coastal Council* in 1992, the Court blurred the line between ownership of land and the opportunity to realize its economic value. In effect, the ruling said physical possession and right of occupation, the traditional meaning of ownership, have been subsumed to economic interest in a piece of land. Obviously, this was not the Court's intent, but a pretty good case can be made that it has been the outcome. This thought process has contributed to the spate of unnecessary, unwise takings by reducing the gravity given to the harm of having one's home taken; since it's no longer the physical, human connection which defines ownership but the economic relationship, and since the property owners are getting compensated at market value, what's the real harm? By distorting the meaning of *ownership* and *taking*, the regulatory-takings crowd has made it easier to kick people off their land.

Joseph Boyle
Lowell, MA

I read with great interest Sam Staley's article on eminent domain. I am fighting a convention center project in Lancaster, Pennsylvania. The state didn't give local officials the right of eminent domain, so what did they do? They found a friendly economic development group to threaten condemnation and shut down a profitable 100-year-old-plus business.

The city economic development authority called the police when I showed up to videotape their meeting. (The Pennsylvania Sunshine Act explicitly permits such filming.) When the police refused to arrest me—I called two lawyers and threatened a civil rights suit—they canceled their meeting rather than have me videotape it.

Ron Harper Jr.
Stevens, PA

Bomb Throwers

In his review of *Nuclear Weapons: A Debate Renewed* ("Learning to Love the Bomb," February), Steve Chapman refers to author Scott D. Sagan's remarks on the "unreliability" of nuclear weapons personnel. He cites the fact that U.S. armed forces screen out 5 percent of their nuclear weapons personnel annually on this account and points out that Islamic nations have no such screening procedure. The implication is that such nations may be vulnerable to personnel releasing nuclear weapons on their own initiative.

But it's a misconception that the "unreliability" discussed by Sagan regards concern over personnel releasing nuclear weapons unauthorized. In point of fact, nuclear control regimes in place prevent this sort of behavior by requiring explicit physical confirmation from national authorities. The prospect of "unreliability" that prompts U.S. screening actually pertains to the potential failure of personnel to execute nuclear release orders; it is necessary to ensure that our personnel are mentally and morally capable of discharging their duty when ordered.

This, of course, says nothing about the nature and extent of the nuclear control regimes prevailing in Pakistan or any other Islamic nation. But the fact that 5 percent of U.S. nuclear personnel are annually judged as being unlikely to release nuclear weapons when ordered gives us no insight into whether Islamic nuclear personnel would be prone to release weapons *without* orders.

Michael J. Dunn
Auburn, WA

Great Stone Faces

Charles Paul Freund ("Big Schlock Candy Mountain," February) did not mention Mount Rushmore's most significant symbolic feature. If you visit in the morning, when the sun shines on Washington's face, you can see a tear glisten on his cheek, as he gazes toward the city that bears his name.

John DeJager
Milford, OH

reason News

We're happy to announce that **reason** is a finalist for a Western Publications Association Maggie Award in the "politics & social issues" category.

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Corn losers; bureaucratic enrichment zones; adventures in light rail; pleasing the censors; bootlegging and violence; the porkiest bill ever; and is art good for us?

E.U. superheroes

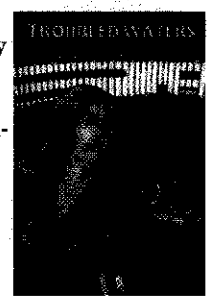
Comic Bureaucracy

Rachel Alembakis

WATCH OUT, SUPERMAN and Wonder Woman. There's a new hero in town, and she's a member of the European Parliament.

In an effort to educate Europe's youth, the European Parliament has published a slick, glossy comic book, *Troubled Waters*, featuring crusading MEP Irina Vega. Vega is a chic cross between Lara Croft and Nancy Drew, legislating her way through the difficult issue of water rights and the setting of Europe-wide water pollution standards. She whizzes between hearings, meetings, and nighttime events, issuing bon mots such as "we have to reach agreement with the council, if necessary via a conciliation committee" while unraveling a plot to sabotage her legislation by a nefarious chemical company dumping toxic waste in rivers.

"This is a product for young people, and our goal was to try at the same time not to say vague things on the project, but not to be scholarly," says Jacques Hinckxt, of the European Parliament's information directorate general. "We had to find a role where the European Parliament's added value was evident enough, visible to the public. That was why an environment subject fit to a better understanding."



Give credit to the book's designers: They had to wade through 600 pages of documents and debate minutes to come up with the plot, plus create a heroine who was culturally and politically unidentifiable with any of the 15 nations that make up the European Union. With her brunette looks and name, Irina could be southern or eastern European, while her bland assertions about the right of all citizens to clean water are neither Christian-Democrat right nor Socialist left (which, along with the Green Party, comprise most of the European Parliament's members).

Troubled Waters has garnered a lot of comment, not all of it positive. Chemical companies were less than pleased with their portrayal as predatory polluters. Industry representatives sent a blistering letter of complaint to the real-life parliament president. Euroskeptics have taken on the slick portrayal of Brussels-Strasbourg beltway life, and even some MEPs have joined in.

"Reaction of most members has been very positive," Hinckxt says. "But there has been some criticism—one member said we should not be seen as having a life like James Bond."

Others have called the project a waste of taxpayers' money. While British newspapers placed the cost of production anywhere between 3 million and 5 million euros, Hinckxt is quick to point out that the cost was in fact a far more modest 540,000 euros for 780,000 copies. A second print run was planned for April. "You can say it's euro-propaganda," Hinckxt says, "but you can't say it's a waste of money." ▮

Corn losers

What's Your Damage?

Brian Doherty

IN FEBRUARY THE creators and distributors of genetically modi-

"The greatest enemies of free enterprise in the U.S. are intellectuals and businessmen."

—Milton Friedman, "Which Way for Capitalism?"

"Our Doublespeak Award goes to Judge Donald T. Barbeau of Minnesota, who rejected Mr. Michael Dengler's petition to name (number?) himself "1069" on the grounds it was 'an offense to basic human dignity and inherently totalitarian.'"

—Brickbats, Bill Birmingham

"The plain fact is that an exclusive concentration on the theory and economics of liberty is not the only kind of battle to undertake today. There is no guarantee in any complex problem that the political dimension is the essential cause of that problem or that the State is the essential or fundamental villain."

—Edith Efron, "The Petr Principle"

"A [Louisiana] state law making the husband the 'head and master' of the property and finances in a marriage has been ruled unconstitutional."

—Trends

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fied (G.M.) StarLink corn settled a $110 million class action suit from corn farmers, marking a victory for environmentalist panic that could retard biotech development.

Back in 2001, StarLink corn, invented to resist an insect pest and intended only for animal feed, was found to have entered the human food supply via Taco Bell taco shells. The Environmental Protection Agency had not approved StarLink for human consumption because of speculative fears that a specific protein could cause an allergic reaction. Even though the U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention found no evidence that such allergic reactions had actually occurred, anti-biotech activists created enough of a public panic that a class action suit against StarLink's sellers and food manufacturers led to a $9 million settlement last year, mostly through dollar-off coupons on food packages.

The class action suit settled for $110 million in February was brought by corn farmers, who argued that their sales were damaged by a backlash against corn caused by the StarLink panic. That is, the fact that anti-G.M. activists frightened everyone about StarLink was enough of an excuse for its makers to be sued—whether or not the corn itself ever harmed anyone. That's a powerful weapon for G.M. opponents: The very panic they create can be the basis of a damage claim.

A radical proposal wasted

Bureaucratic Enrichment Zone

Jesse Walker

CINCINNATI'S "empowerment zone" program, a federally funded effort to jump-start development in several low-income neighborhoods, has just been audited by the Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD). According to the report, administrators at the Cincinnati Empowerment Corporation have misspent thousands of dollars and failed to account for hundreds of thousands more. Meanwhile, much of the money that was spent "properly" nonetheless failed to achieve the program's goals.

HUD found that one zone-funded company, Nu-Blend Paints Inc., "failed to complete job training or employ a single zone resident—despite spending $239,489," *The Cincinnati Enquirer* reports. "The Empowerment Corp. disagrees, saying it provided check stubs and documents to show one employee completed job training."

Cincinnati's empowerment zone is one of seven around the country that have been audited, and it is hardly the only one to have spawned such waste. When Chicago's program was surveyed in 1998, $1.6 million in inappropriate spending was uncovered.

When the British planner Peter Hall first imagined "enterprise zones" (as they were originally called) in 1977, they were a deregulatory proposal: Part of the inner city would be freed of taxes and regulations, encouraging outside businesses to invest there and local entrepreneurs to launch companies of their own.

During the '80s, the more radical versions of the proposal were dropped: There was no more talk of eliminating licensing requirements, for example. The idea began to seem less like a way to gestate new enterprises and more like an incentive for businesses just outside the zone to avoid some taxes by moving a few blocks down the street.

By the time zone enthusiast Jack Kemp became HUD secretary in 1989, the idea had changed to the point where new federal subsidies were part of the mix. The revised plan attracted bipartisan support, and the Clinton administration passed its Empowerment Zone/Enterprise Community Initiative in 1993. The measure's deregulatory origins forgotten, it became a program of "targeted investment."

Now we're learning where those "investments" went, and it's not pretty. Fortunately, Washington actually appears to be learning from failure: The Bush administration has cut funding for the program.

Adventures in light rail

Massively Misguided Transit

Brian Doherty

ALTHOUGH THEY invariably cost far more per passenger mile than buses or automobiles, light-rail trains continue to capture the hearts of urban planners nationwide. Light-rail systems, as opposed to heavy-rail systems like New York's famous subway, use trains that travel on the surface, crossing other traffic rights-of-way. According to the Web site lightrail.com, such systems operate in 18 American cities, with four more under construction and more than 35 brand new systems approved or under active consideration.

One of the cities to get on board recently is Madison, Wisconsin, where the city council in January decided to spend $2.5 million to plan a light-rail line. An intergovernmental organization called Transport 2020 had propagandized the public with a 40-page report on the wonders light rail could bring to the Madison area. That report was based on a longer study done by Parsons Brinkerhoff, a company that designs and builds light-rail lines.

According to transportation policy analyst Randal O'Toole, Parsons Brinkerhoff, despite its direct pecuniary interest in the matter, was more intellectually honest than the governmental Transport 2020 crew. Parsons Brinkerhoff indicated that with two new commuter rail lines, Madison could raise the number of daily trips taken on mass transit, to 56,650 a day, from 37,250 trips without any new effort. But the firm also noted that daily trips could be raised to 55,500 merely by enhancing bus »

Quotes

"I didn't realize what all was in it."

—Rep. Robert T. Matsui (D-Calif.), referring to the McCain-Feingold campaign reform law, in the February 18 *New York Times*. Matsui, now chairman of the Democratic Congressional Campaign Committee, voted for the law last year.

"I am only in favor of war with Iraq if the entire affair takes place between the morning of February 21st and the evening of Sunday March 2nd. This is because *The Daily Show* will be on hiatus during this period, and, historically, massive loss of life has proven not conducive to producing a comedy news program."

—Ben Karlin, co-executive producer of *The Daily Show With Jon Stewart*, in *Slate* on February 19

Source

Can't afford a celebrity-style fact-finding mission to Iraq? Then visit http://dear_raed.blogspot.com/, a weblog written by a Baghdad resident writing under the nom de plume "Salam Pax." Filled with on-the-ground observations and dark humor, it is a fascinating commentary on the world's hottest hot spot. A recent entry reads: "I have so little control over my life these days let alone understanding where the world is heading to. I hope we all be spared any unnecessary grief...Saddam has a new photo taken with his sons on the 4th of this month. Notice the friendly looking pistol in [his son's] Uday's belt. A perfect family photo."

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Brickbats

Two students from the Y'Hica Institute for the Visual Arts in London recently received student loans from a program administered by the U.S. Department of Education. Not bad for a school that doesn't exist. The school was created by the General Accounting Office to see how closely the Education Department monitors student aid programs. The answer, apparently, is not very.

When Brad Knotts and William Van Sickle offered to help unload a delivery of cigarettes at the Keystone Citgo Laundry Carwash in Indianapolis, no one blinked. The men were regulars at the store and had become friends with its employees. But when $2,000 worth of smokes turned up missing, the owner looked at security video and found the two men really *had* helped—helped themselves, that is, to quite a few boxes. In addition to being cigarette thieves, Knotts and Van Sickle are technicians for the Department of Public Works. The two were on duty and driving a city truck at the time of the theft.

Great Britain's Home Office has granted asylum to a Taliban soldier who fought British and American troops in Afghanistan. The man says he fears persecution from the new Western-backed government in Kabul. The U.K. reportedly is considering asylum requests from at least two other Taliban members.

European Union bureaucrats have ruled that children's swing sets can be no higher than three meters. They've also issued strict regulations on how far seats can be from the ground and from the frame. The rules aren't law. But if anyone is injured on a swing that doesn't meet E.U. standards, the city, park, or school that owns it could face lawsuits. At least one English village already has removed old swings that don't meet the standards, even though no one has ever been hurt on them.

One in five Britons is obese. Ten percent of 6-year-olds are obese. Now British public health officials are pointing the finger at restaurants and packaged-food companies that serve massive meals. They are calling on firms to sign a code of conduct that would require them to cut serving sizes, abolish jumbo products, and stop advertising high-fat, high-sugar products to children. If restaurants, soda companies, and snack makers won't comply, the government says it eventually will force them.

Fazl Hadi Shinwari, Afghanistan's new chief justice, has banned cable television. Shinwari, who is also a Muslim cleric, says some of the foreign news, sports, and entertainment programs are contrary to Islam. The chief justice also wants to ban coeducation. "I want education for women," he said, "but we want men and women not to sit together."

In England, East Sussex education officials send out a notice each year reminding parents when school is about to start. This year they sent notices to the families of at least 17 dead children. The error arose when local officials obtained the birth records of area children, which included the names of children who later died, and used those records for their mailing.

Charles Oliver

› service—at a capital cost of $60.3 million, compared to a whopping $242 million for light rail.

When Transport 2020 summarized this report for public consumption, it left out the data regarding the bus alternative. As O'Toole puts it, "*Transport 2020* is telling unwary Madisonians that commuter rail is needed to increase transit ridership by 50 percent. In fact, all commuter rail does is unnecessarily spend $181 million to get less than 2 percent more riders."

Light rail remains popular with local governments because it can mean huge state and federal subsidies for construction. O'Toole argues that light rail also plays to city officials' affinity for "monument building" and their desire to seem devoted to public transit. But such devotion comes with a high price tag: According to O'Toole's calculations, cities that have light rail or are planning to build it spend anywhere from 18 to 70 times as much per passenger mile on mass transit as on highways.

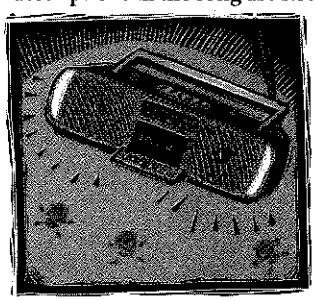
Pleasing the censors

Indecent Rules

Jesse Walker

TWO YEARS AGO, the Federal Communications Commission hit the cash-strapped noncommercial Oregon station KBOO with a $7,000 fine. Its crime: playing Sarah Jones' "Your Revolution," a sexually explicit slap at hip-hop misogyny. Now the commission has rescinded the fine.

"While this was a very close case," David Solomon of the Enforcement Bureau told *Radio and Records*, "we now conclude that the broadcast was not indecent because, on balance and in context, the sexual descriptions in the song are not sufficiently graphic to warrant sanction."



On one level, this is a victory for free speech: A radio station will not be fined for merely playing a song, and an FCC that permits far more graphic raps to be broadcast has removed itself from the embarrassing position of declaring an *attack* on those records is too seamy to air. On another level, though, we still have the ugly spectacle—one might even call it indecent—of a small group of bureaucrats weighing the social merit of a recording, checking it against their indecency tally sheet, and ruling on whether it's suitable for the tender ears of Portland, Oregon. After four decades of beating back censorship, it's hard to believe that such as process has survived.

Bootlegging and violence

Nicotine Fights

Jacob Sullum

"INCREASING THE cigarette tax saves lives," New York Mayor Michael Bloomberg declared last year while pushing a 19-fold increase in the city's levy. To the contrary, suggests a recent report from the Cato Institute: Increasing the cigarette tax can be deadly.

In July the combined state and local cigarette tax in New York City hit $3 a pack, the highest in the country. Patrick Fleenor, former chief economist at the Tax Foundation, argues that the steep hike is bound to promote the sort of black market activity that has been associated with violence in the past.

During the first four months after the tax hike, according to official figures, cigarette sales in the city fell by 50 percent compared to the same period in 2001. But that doesn't mean New York has half as many smokers as it did before Bloomberg came to their rescue. The official figures do not reflect border shopping (which nowadays includes online sales as well as purchases in other states) or bootlegging.

As Fleenor shows, New York has a long, bloody his- »

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Balance Sheet

Jeff A. Taylor

Search Party

Airports in Seattle, Minneapolis–St. Paul, and Atlanta buck a directive from the Transportation Security Administration to search cars entering airport grounds. Airport officials say they need probable cause.

Sober State

Maine plans to get out of the booze biz and save $100 million in the process. Like many states, Maine serves as the sole liquor wholesaler for local retail outlets and operates 13 stores itself, ensuring Soviet-level selection and service.

Loud and Clear

Telecom analysts and Net providers begin to see that Internet phone service could challenge the incumbent Bell monopolies. Unfortunately, so do the Bells and their buddies, the regulators.

Price Drop

Microsoft says it might have to drop its prices due to competition from open source software such as Linux. Consumers will win, but only if Linux competes on merit and not via government mandates. Some jurisdictions now require new government software buys to be open source.

OMB Bomb

Amid the bland budget boilerplate, the Office of Management and Budget notes that the Drug Enforcement Administration "is unable to demonstrate progress in reducing the availability of illegal drugs in the United States." The DEA says it just needs to redefine its accomplishments.

Ad Health

TV ads for prescription drugs seem to help patients talk to their doctors. Researchers from Massachusetts General Hospital, Harvard University, and Harris Interactive find that one quarter of patients surveyed got new treatment for serious ailments as a result of asking questions about TV ads.

Convenient Theory

Rep. Sue Myrick (R-N.C.) claims the terrorist threat is more widespread and insidious than we thought. "Look at who runs all the convenience stores across the country," she explains. Our very Big Gulps are at risk.

Junk Dealers

Dim bulbs across the country gather up *Columbia* debris and attempt to sell it via the online auction site eBay; they get caught more or less immediately. The profit motive can move even the profoundly stupid.

Kinko's Cops

The FBI at first denies, then admits, flying a spy plane over Bloomington, Indiana. The bureau explains it is merely watching places where foreign nationals might be able to send a fax or e-mail late at night. Oh.

Cold Cash

As if enough isn't already smuggled across the U.S.-Mexico border, add Freon to the list. The U.S. banned the refrigerant in 1996, but it's likely to be legal in Mexico until at least 2010. Demand for Freon will remain high until all the pre-1994 cars with air conditioning are off the road.

No Dice

Math teachers across America use "probability cubes" to teach math concepts to kids. You call them dice. Schools don't, so as not to encourage gambling.

Visa Excepted

Stepped-up security worries have U.S. businesses hamstrung by visa backlogs. Mexican tourists wait months for visas to go to Florida, while foreign buyers of big-ticket items such as planes and construction equipment can't get into the country to finalize sales.

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Data

Stimulant Response

Jacob Sullum

At the end of February, the Food and Drug Administration (FDA) signaled that it may ban dietary supplements containing the herbal stimulant ephedra if it decides they pose "a significant or unreasonable risk of illness or injury." That phrase is open to interpretation, but the risk posed by ephedra seems quite modest when compared to the risks associated with widely used over-the-counter and prescription drugs.

Although press reports commonly cite an estimate of "at least 100 deaths" linked to ephedra, a RAND Corporation study commissioned by the FDA found only two documented deaths that were investigated to rule out other causes. Even in those cases, the FDA concedes, the evidence is not conclusive.

With an estimated 12 million to 17 million Americans taking something like 3 billion doses of ephedra products a year, FDA Administrator Mark McClellan admits that "serious adverse events from ephedra appear to be infrequent."

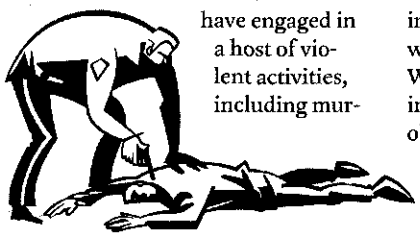
That point is underlined by data from the federal government's Drug Abuse Warning Network. Selected DAWN numbers for 1999 (the most recent year for which nationwide totals are available) indicate that two deaths—or even 100—over several years would not make ephedra stand out on a list of drugs mentioned by medical examiners.

DAWN Medical Examiner Mentions (1999)

Drug	Mentions
diazepam (Valium)	811
diphenhydramine (Benadryl)	641
Elavil (antidepressant)	477
nortriptyline (antidepressant)	424
acetaminophen (Tylenol)	427
lidocaine (heart drug & local anesthetic)	384
Prozac	305
quinine	250
meprobamate (tranquilizer)	170
aspirin	104

Source: Drug Abuse Warning Network

› tory of cigarette bootlegging, with smugglers fighting among themselves, hijacking trucks, and robbing dealers. "The enormous profits that can be made smuggling cigarettes into New York have lured smalltime crooks, mobsters, street gangs, and terrorists into the racket," he writes.



"Those criminals have engaged in a host of violent activities, including murder, kidnapping, and armed robbery, to earn and protect their illicit profits....If history is any guide, the involvement of several rival groups in large-scale cigarette smuggling operations that also face competition from small-scale bootleggers creates a very volatile situation."

If you think Fleenor's warnings are overwrought, consider what New York Gov. Malcolm Wilson said in 1974. "One major incentive to organized crime," he observed, "is the high New York City cigarette taxes, piled on top of the state tax, which have made that city the promised land for cigarette bootleggers." Taking inflation into account, the tax when Wilson spoke was less than half what it is now.

Eminent domain takings

We Want Your House

Sara Rimensnyder

TODAY, A BEAUTIFUL home sits at 604 Calvert Street in Muncie, Indiana. Sometime soon, if an eminent domain case brought by Ball State University is successful, it will be replaced by a parking lot.

Until October 2002, 604 Calvert was the home of Jacquolyne Werner, who had lived there for decades with her husband, David (who died in 2000), raised a family there, and been actively involved in the campus community. She died the same day she found out that the university, which had been offering to buy her home for a couple of years, planned to take it via eminent domain.

Now her children are resisting Ball State administrators who want the property to build a parking lot. It's an especially unfortunate confrontation because it might have been avoided. Months before his mother's death, Michael Werner had asked for a little patience from Ball State; he was trying to convince his mother to move with him to Florida, after which they would have been open to selling the house.

But now he's fighting the university on principle. "My mother devoted her life to that university," he explains. "And still, they wouldn't quit pestering her. She was an old woman, and she felt like they were trying to take away her home. Which they were!"

Werner sounds cautiously optimistic about the family's chances in court. But to his knowledge, Ball State has won every eminent domain case it has pursued in the neighborhood. Political science professor John Rouse notes that "the university is the only 'industry' left in Muncie. It's the new gorilla in town. This animal gets to sit anywhere it wants."

University officials did not return a call for comment.

Drug war spending

Cosmetic Surgery

Sara Rimensnyder

PUBLIC DISSATISFACTION with the war on drugs is mounting, putting federal warriors under increasing pressure to cut an enforcement and treatment bud-

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get that has ballooned from $65 million in 1969 to $19.2 billion in 2003. But rather than actually spend less, the administration hopes to rely on some Enron-style creative bookkeeping.

According to a new report from Common Sense for Drug Policy, planned revisions in the way the feds calculate the budget would make it appear that the administration has cut drug war spending to $11.4 billion. At the same time, the reporting changes will create the illusion that roughly equal amounts are being spent on enforcement and treatment, rather than the traditional 70-30 split.

For example, drug czar John Walters would like to exclude the $3 billion per year spent housing federal drug prisoners from the budget, claiming that it's not a primary cost of federal drug control policy. Changes in budgeting methodology also would allow the Defense Department to reduce its reported drug expenditures. That would be an impressive feat: According to the RAND Corporation, the department already omits the cost of personnel when figuring its drug control budget.

At the same time, the new reporting plan would inflate the amount of funding for treatment, giving the impression of a kinder, gentler drug control policy. For the first time, the Office of National Drug Control Policy will include money spent treating alcoholics, thus instantly upping the treatment tally by $500 million.

Is Art Good for Us?

Nick Gillespie

Joli Jensen

In *Is Art Good for Us?: Beliefs about High Culture in American Life* (Rowman & Littlefield), Joli Jensen answers her titular question with a resounding *no*. She wants "us to give up the faith in the arts as *doing* good, and commit instead to a faith in the arts as *being* good." Drawing especially on the work of John Dewey, Jensen, a communications professor at the University of Tulsa, takes aim against an "instrumental view of culture"—that good art makes us good and bad art makes us bad—and champions an "expressive view of culture"—that art is a way that people connect with and explore their place in the world.

Editor-in-Chief Nick Gillespie spoke with Jensen in March.

Q: Why do so many people hold an instrumental view of culture?

A: People like to look for simple causes and simple cures. That view is very tempting because if certain kinds of culture cause bad things in society, then you can change that culture and fix society. There's an assumption that art is an instrument like medicine or a toxin that can be injected into us and transform us. But there's very little evidence of a direct effect, and we all participate in creating the meaning of a particular piece of work. We should always be considerate about how we choose to tell stories and the stories we choose to tell. That's an ongoing cultural conversation, but I mistrust attempts to control that conversation by excluding a priori categories of stories or by assuming that the stories we are telling are harming us.

Q: If the arts aren't medicine, what are they?

A: They're expressions of creative intellectual energy. This is related to John Dewey's understanding of culture as a way that all of us, even those of us who are not in a special guardian class, understand and symbolically engage the world. I also question the distinction we constantly try to make between the arts and popular culture and other forms of creative expression such as architecture, park design, gardening, and the like.

Q: Does that moot aesthetic judgment?

A: No. It's healthy for a society to debate what is a good or bad aesthetic experience and what is good or bad cultural expression. But it's important that we fundamentally respect the tastes and choices of people who are choosing forms different than our own. We should stop thinking that we're talking about something essential in each cultural form rather than constantly renegotiating what is good or bad, authentic or commercial. Thirty years from now today's commercial culture will be "authentic" culture.

Q: What's your mass-culture poison?

A: I'm a *Law & Order* addict, in all of its iterations, but especially *Special Victims Unit*.

The porkiest bill ever?

Overflowing Barrels

Jacob Sullum

IN FEBRUARY, FACING a yet-to-be-calculated bill for war with Iraq on top of budget deficits as far as the eye can see, Congress did what it does best, passing what may have been the most pork-laden spending bill ever. The $397 billion monstrosity included earmarked, local-interest appropriations that Citizens Against Government Waste (CAGW) expected to exceed the $20.1 billion record set in 2002.

"Representatives and senators, Republicans and Democrats have loaded this bill with some of the most wasteful projects in history," said CAGW President Tom Schatz. "This is more pork with one vote than they have ever passed in their lives."

Some highlights:

- $1 million for the Iowa Historical Society for exhibits related to the World Food Prize;
- $732,000 for the Center for Designing Foods at Iowa State;
- $725,000 for the Please Touch Museum in Philadelphia;
- $500,000 for the Boat House Museum in St. Charles, Missouri;
- $500,000 for the Tongass Coast Aquarium in Alaska;
- $210,000 for swine hoop barn research in Iowa;
- $200,000 for the Maxine Waters Employment Preparation Center;
- $150,000 for new office space for Sen. Robert Byrd (D-W.Va.);
- $100,000 for the Sea Otter Commission in Alaska;
- $350,000 for the Rock and Roll Hall of Fame;
- $90,000 for the Cowgirl Hall of Fame;
- $750,000 for the Baseball Hall of Fame.

"I'd nominate Congress for the Pork Barrel Hall of Fame," Rep. Jeff Flake (R-Ariz.) told *The New York Times*, "but I'm afraid the appropriators would actually try to appropriate money for it."

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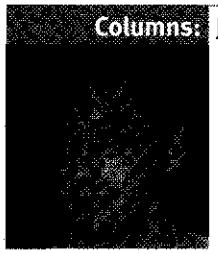

The Mystery of Mary Rosh

How a new form of journalism investigated a gun research riddle

STORIES THAT MIGHT never be broken if a single reporter had to spend days researching them are now being covered by dilettante swarms rather than diligent professionals. It's a new form of journalism, reminiscent less of old-fashioned investigative reporting than of the decentralized "peer production" that generates open source software. If it had a slogan, it might be "We report, we decide."

New York University law professor Yochai Benkler has argued that open source works because programming is a "granular" task—the job of coding a massive piece of software can be broken into many small pieces—and because the Internet allows the rapid collating and peer filtering of work done by thousands of dispersed individuals. Traditional programming requires a few coders to commit a lot of time and effort, for which they will reasonably expect to be paid. When the software's source code is freely available, however, the big job can be done in small increments by a large pool of volunteers. The results are filtered for quality the same way, with superior pieces of coding copied and spread through the population.

Distributed journalism works similarly. Different lines of inquiry will occur to different people, who bring different kinds of knowledge to bear on the same topic. The ability to concatenate that information online—particularly via those motley commentary sites and open diaries called blogs—makes the information discovered by each available to all.

To see the process in action, consider the case of John R. Lott, author of *More Guns, Less Crime*, which argues that concealed-carry gun laws reduce crime. In 1999 the sociologist Otis Dudley Duncan questioned Lott's claim that "if national surveys are correct, 98 percent of the time that people use guns defensively, they merely have to brandish a weapon to break off an attack."

The major research on defensive gun use, Duncan objected, had shown firing rates ranging from 21 percent to over 60 percent. Lott replied that "national surveys" actually referred to his own heretofore unknown survey of 2,424 households. When Duncan pressed him for the survey data, Lott demurred, saying a hard drive crash had destroyed his data set and the original tally sheets had been lost. In fact, there seemed to be no record at all of the study, nor could Lott recall the names of any of the students who he said had worked on it. Some people began to suspect the study, which is tangential to Lott's conclusions in *More Guns*, didn't exist.

The controversy moved to an e-mail list for academics interested in gun issues. There it brewed until January 10, 2003, when it was discovered and linked to by blogger Marie Gryphon. Dozens of blogs picked up the story, and Tim Lambert, one of Lott's leading critics on the e-list, set up a weblog of his own.

Within weeks, articles on the controversy appeared in *The Washington Post*, *U.S. News and World Report*, and other major outlets. Northwestern University law professor James Lindgren, who played a leading role in investigating both Lott and the disgraced gun historian Michael Bellesiles, notes that "at the parallel stage of the investigation into Bellesiles, he was getting a prize for his work."

Why did the Lott story break so quickly? Part of the difference relates to how the two scandals were investigated. The initial heavy lifting in the Bellesiles case was done by amateur historian Clayton Cramer, later joined by Lindgren, who tried with little immediate success to

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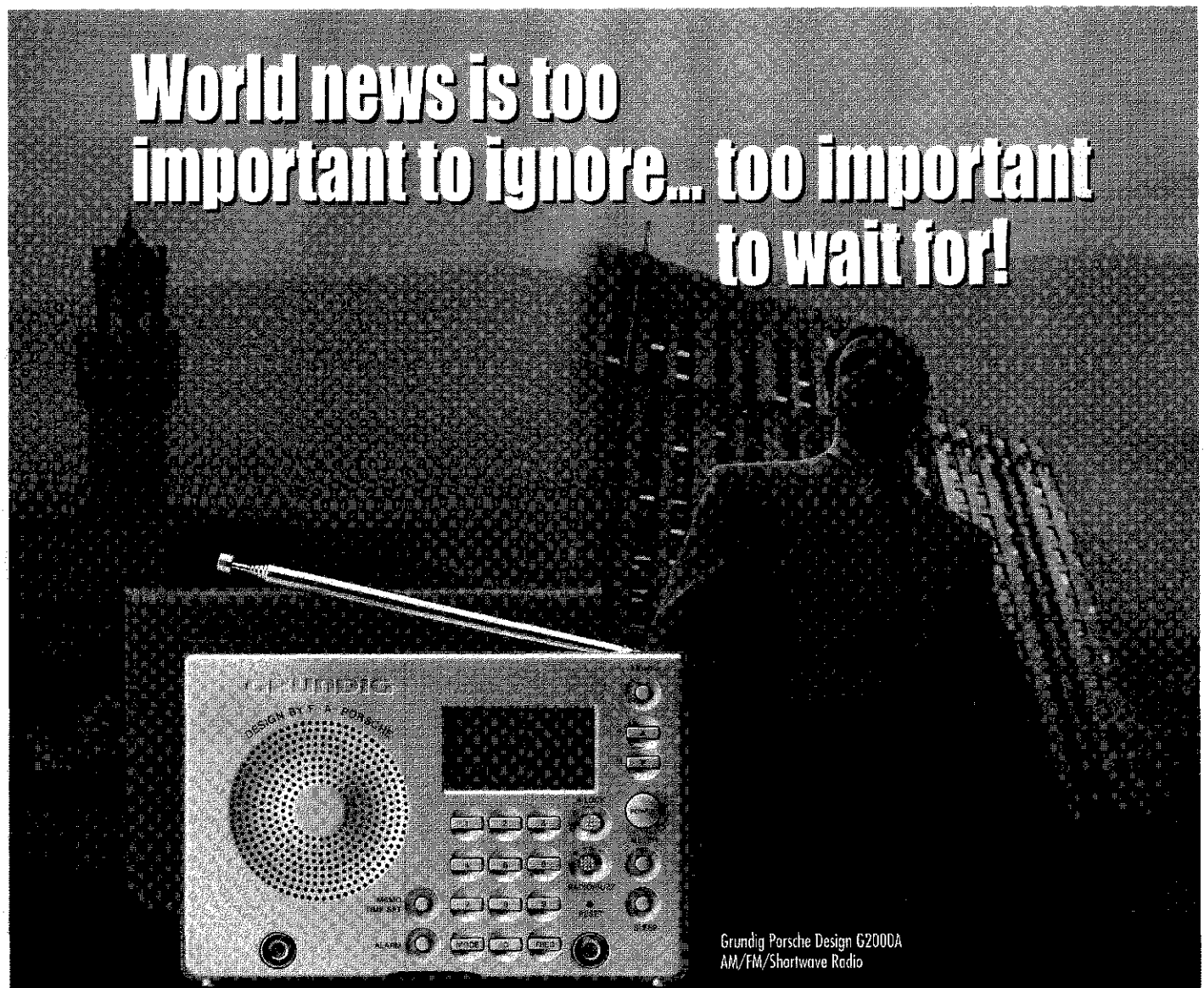
World news is too important to ignore... too important to wait for!



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interest professional historians in the problems he found with Bellesiles' research. Only when a few committed investigators had uncovered clear proof of malfeasance did the wheels of the academy begin to turn. At that point, the mainstream media took notice.

With Lott, most of the information bloggers had when the story first leaked, including extensive interviews with many of the principals, was again owed to Lindgren's efforts. Once it was released into the blogosphere, however, reporters could find it quickly on blogs. At the same time, the investigation became an open source affair.

The first round of dispersed investigation came when a Minnesota attorney named David Gross came forward to say he had been the subject of a survey that sounded like Lott's. *The Washington Times* ran a brief story implying that the question about Lott's survey was now closed.

But bloggers were more skeptical: Gross turned out to be a gun rights activist himself, with the group Concealed Carry Reform, NOW! Historian Thomas Spencer unearthed a letter to the Minneapolis *Star Tribune* in which Gross wrote that gun control advocates "dance on the graves of the innocent victims and glory in their spilled blood." Another blogger, the pseudonymous Atrios, found news reports recounting how Gross had taken over the names of several gun control groups that had neglected to renew their corporate status with the state.

Of course, a gun activist would be the most likely to hear about the controversy and come forward. But skeptics continued to doubt Gross' account, and some of Lott's former defenders wrote that they wished for some further independent confirmation of his account. Lott, currently a resident scholar at the American Enterprise Institute, has conducted a new survey, which he includes in his new book, *The Bias Against Guns* (Regnery).

Meanwhile, several of the bloggers who had been writing about the controversy—a group that included me—drew the ire of someone called Mary Rosh. Rosh, who identified herself as a former student of Lott's who had long admired his fairness and rigor, said that it was irresponsible to post links to the survey debate without calling Lott first.

> If the new "distributed journalism" generated by weblogs had a slogan, it might be "We report, we decide."

This sounded odd, not only because bloggers very seldom do that kind of background research before posting a link, but because Lott had made precisely the same criticism several times in e-mails to bloggers covering the story.

A Google search revealed that Rosh had for several years been a prolific contributor to Usenet forums, where she regularly and vociferously defended the work of Lott. On a whim, I compared the I.P. address on Rosh's comment to the one on an e-mail Lott had sent me from his home. They were the same.

I posted all of this, and to his credit Lott confessed. "The MaRyRoSh pen name account," he explained, "was created years ago for an account for my children, using the first two letters of the names of my four sons."

The news spread quickly, and the second round of distributed investigation began. Bloggers unearthed old posts by "Rosh" and linked to them on their sites. Among the gems: "[Lott] was the best professor that I ever had....Lott finally had to tell us that it was best for us to try and take classes from other professors more to be exposed to other ways of teaching graduate material." Many were troubled by Rosh's apparent attempt to get an online interlocutor, who claimed to have anonymously peer-reviewed one of Lott's papers, to reveal his identity. (Lott later told *The Chronicle of Higher Education* that he was merely trying to force his opponent to confess that he had lied about being an academic.)

Whatever the final effect of the controversy on Lott's reputation, it demonstrates that the effect of blogs on journalism is more than hype. If Lott is at last conclusively vindicated, perhaps by the emergence of one of his student volunteers, it will probably be the result of the exposure the story received from bloggers. If he is not, he can count on a thousand-eyed Argus keeping a close watch on his future work.

Perhaps more important, the Lott saga proves that distributed journalism works. This matters, because the process depends partly on people's belief that it *can* work. Stories such as Lott's show that it's worth the time—that if you're unsure about a fact in a news story, or think a reporter should have asked another question, it's worthwhile to fire up your browser or fire off an e-mail.

Julian Sanchez (julian@juliansanchez.com) is a writer and weblogger living in Washington, D.C.

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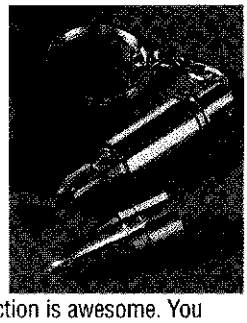

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Skin Flicks 101

What porn studies profs don't get about sex

LAST YEAR'S NEWS reports about a course at the University of California at Berkeley called "Male Sexuality" seemed like a cultural conservative's worst nightmare—or fondest dream, depending on how you look at it. The story had everything from lurid tales of sexual depravity (including a field trip to a gay strip club) to damning evidence of academic decline (class work included such intellectual exercises as photographing your genitalia and then trying to match other students' genitals to their faces). And it was set in no less a bastion of academic radicalism than Berkeley.

Following the negative publicity, the administration suspended the student-devised, student-taught course. The class was reinstated a month later, when it was concluded that some of the most scandalous doings, such as an end-of-semester orgy, were not technically part of the course.

The controversy was but one of a series of recent scandals about sex in academe. These sex scandals do not involve shocking exposés of illicit activities, of lecherous professors preying on innocent students or undergrads holding drunken orgies in dorms and fraternity houses. They are about officially sanctioned academic activities, such as courses and conferences, that some see as cutting-edge studies of sex and sexuality and others regard as an obscene fraud.

Indeed, the academy may have edged out the art world as the center of the debate about graphic sexual content and cultural value. Unfortunately but perhaps not surprisingly, this debate often pits those who seem opposed to any explicit discussion of sex—particularly sexual activities other than heterosexual intercourse—against those who seem to confuse exhibitionism with intellectual discourse.

Take the outcry over a 1997 conference at the New Paltz campus of the State University of New York. The gathering, organized by the Women's Studies Department, was creatively titled "Revolting Behavior: The Challenges of Women's Sexual Freedom," and eventually led to an attempt to oust the college president, Roger W. Bowen.

The critiques of the conference by *New Criterion* Editor Roger Kimball and SUNY Trustee Candace de Russy dripped with disgust at the perversities celebrated there; de Russy's list of the horribles, in a March 1998 article for *The Chronicle of Higher Education*, included not only sadomasochism but anal sex, lesbianism, bisexuality, and female masturbation. Kimball's *Wall Street Journal* article, succinctly titled "A Syllabus for Sickos," lamented "a vision of sexuality totally emancipated from nature."

This may sound prudish and closed-minded, but it's difficult not to sympathize with some of Kimball's and de Russy's concerns when you read descriptions of several events at the conference. In a workshop on sex toys, the presenter—the owner of a Manhattan boutique—explained the use of anal beads and mocked "tight assholes" by demonstrating a stilted walk in front of the room. Another panel featured a performance by a stripper who simulated sexual acts and whipped a male panelist onstage. Defenders of the conference accused its critics of trying to "police ideas," but just what ideas were being expressed here is not entirely clear.

Besides having all the intellectual weight of a bachelor party, the new academic explorations of sexuality are riddled with double standards. While "Revolting Behavior" fea-

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tured advocacy of lesbian S&M (and what critics contend was unabashed "recruitment" by its practitioners), de Russy rightly noted that "if male faculty members had invited male recruiters from heterosexual-sadomasochism groups to campus to promote participation by female college students," an outcry would have been sure to follow. Nor is it easy to imagine a male parallel to another controversial campus event, a 2000 one-day festival titled "Cuntfest" and billed as a celebration of womanhood. Quite a few of these celebrations, reportedly including some of the panels at the "Revolting Behavior" conference, degenerate into by-the-numbers male bashing.

Another much-debated academic trend is the proliferation of "porn studies." Courses on pornography can now be found at numerous schools, including the University of Massachusetts at Amherst, the University of Arizona, the Massachusetts Institute of Technology, and Wesleyan. In the Wesleyan course, taught by Hope Weissman, a professor of women's studies, the final project requires students to produce a pornographic work of their own—photography, fiction, or film.

Ironically, the push to legitimize porn studies has come largely from female scholars and self-identified feminists, such as Weissman and Laura Kipnis, a media studies professor at Northwestern University. This may be yet another double standard: Male academics crusading to incorporate pornography into the curriculum would have been crucified as lechers and sexists.

On the bright side, this trend represents a turn away from the "victim feminist" obsession with pornography, and sexuality itself, as male victimization of women. But that's a rather thin silver lining.

One needn't be a prude or a hidebound academic traditionalist to roll one's eyes at the earnest assertions of porn studies champions. Amherst English professor Richard Burt, among others, has said that pornography should be treated no differently from any other genre of film or literature.

In a way, this is a reductio ad absurdum of the postmodernist creed that no "text" is truly superior to any other. In a 2001 article in the *Los Angeles Times*, Burt boldly declares that no study of film adaptations of Shakespeare can be complete without a look at hard-core porno flicks like *A Midsummer Night's Cream*.

> Recent college sex scandals do not involve shocking exposés of undergrads holding drunken orgies in fraternity houses. They are about officially sanctioned academic activities.

If porn studies and events like "Revolting Behavior" take intellectual content out of the academy, they also take human content out of human sexuality (and perhaps sexual content as well). "Transgressive" acts and identities are celebrated for their defiance of social norms.

At the same time, there is scarcely any sense of the emotions, good and bad, that actual human beings bring to actual sex—not only love but jealousy, fear, and anger; not only the quest for intimacy and human connection but the desire for power and conquest. The kinds of things, in other words, that cannot be captured by hard-core porn—where, as Vladimir Nabokov wrote in the afterword to *Lolita*, "action has to be limited to the copulation of clichés" and "style, structure, imagery should never distract the reader from his tepid lust"—or by sex toy demonstrations.

Some conservative critics go far beyond this, seeming to suggest that the depiction of sexuality in art is never an appropriate subject for academic study. (One article, for instance, mocks a University of Chicago course titled "Love and Eros in Japanese History.")

But a class that included *Lolita*, or the 18th-century French classic *Dangerous Liaisons*, or even sexual artifacts of nonpornographic modern popular culture such as the movie *Chasing Amy*, would be a far more meaningful exploration of human sexuality than all the porn studies courses across the land combined.

Contributing Editor Cathy Young (cathyyoung2@cs.com) is a columnist for The Boston Globe and the author of Ceasefire! Why Women and Men Must Join Forces to Achieve True Equality (The Free Press).

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Hillbilly Heartache

A Georgia senator gets a dose of reality

ZELL MILLER, A senator from the Georgia mountains who apparently identifies with the heartache of hillbillies, went on a little rampage recently, slamming CBS President Leslie Moonves for developing a new reality show called *The Real Beverly Hillbillies*.

Moonves is under pressure from advertisers to come up with new reality shows. In fact, every network executive is probably more to be pitied than despised for being treated like a puppet by Madison Avenue moguls who want more and more bizarre versions of *The Real World*. But in this case that's not even the point.

Miller claims the new program will be a "minstrel show" that makes fun of the poor. (The metaphor is a stretch, since minstrel shows were invented by white people to showcase the music of black people. If this were a minstrel show, CBS would have black people dressed up like hillbillies singing Hank Williams tunes.)

Anyway, Miller thinks it's an insult to take a poor white family from down in the holler and stick 'em in a Beverly Hills mansion to see what happens.

Yet every hillbilly I've ever met—and my reporting career has included stints in both Arkansas and Tennessee—was proud of his background. Proud of living in the back country, proud of living in the same place his whole life, proud of his ability to shoot squirrels and wild pigs, proud of whatever local quirks made his county the poorest or the crookedest (a term that could apply to both the slope of the roads and the quality of the politicians) or the most notorious place in the hills.

In fact, hillbillies themselves were the first to capitalize commercially on the hillbilly mystique. Whether you're in the Ozarks or Appalachia, you're never more than 15 minutes from a store that sells corncob pipes to tourists, not to mention those straw hats that make you look like Mr. Greenjeans.

The idea of sending hillbillies to live in Beverly Hills is fatally flawed anyway. As redneck trailer-park dwellers have proved for years on *The Jerry Springer Show*, these people are so media-savvy that they know exactly what the producer wants and are more than prepared to provide an outrageously overblown version of it. The folks that end up living on Beverly Drive will already know their way around a TV camera—because what do you think they've been doing back in the woods their entire lives? Watching TV!

But there's a more fundamental reason why Miller should welcome the experiment. The family depicted in the original 1960s series, *The Beverly Hillbillies*, turned out to be wiser, kinder, and more intelligent than the city slickers around them.

You had Jed, whose homespun wisdom always worked, even though it made sense only to him. You had Granny, who held the family together by sheer force of will. You had Jethro, who provided comic relief but was the hunka hunka burning love that every girl wanted. And you had Ellie Mae, who was a liberated woman before her time, yet still feminine.

The doofuses in the plot line were Miss Jane, the pseudo-sophisticate whose efforts to "reform" the Clampetts never worked, and the oily banker who never approved of their investment plans.

The Clampetts actually turned out to be more Californian than the Californians, as their fierce independence and unashamed individuality—they were who they were—resembled the hippie lifestyle more than anything else. We're not bound by the principles of the past, they said, and we're not impressed by the trappings of wealth, and we'll live exactly as we please.

If there were an official Hillbilly Creed, it would be:

- Leave us be.
- Be kind to strangers.
- If somebody threatens your kinfolk, don't be afraid to get the shotgun.
- Everybody's at the same level. There are no classes.

The Clampetts, in short, are all-American small-*d* democrats.

Miller should watch a few episodes. He could use that kind of class in Congress. ■

Joe Bob Briggs (joebob@upi.com) is a columnist for UPI.

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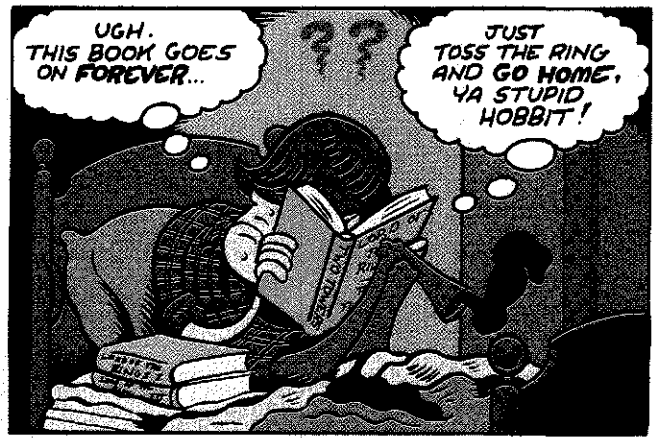
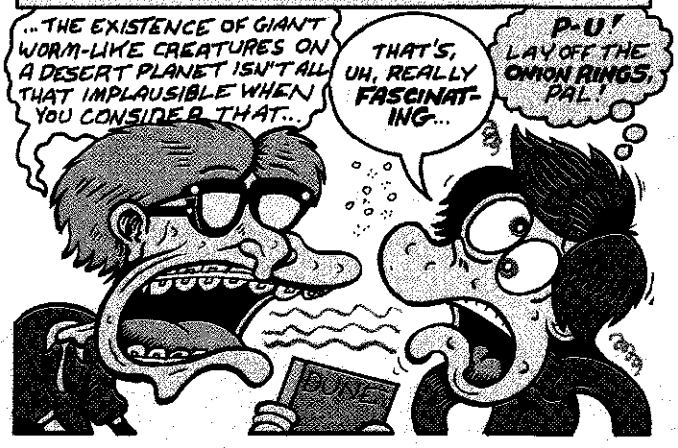
THE NERD-IFICATION OF AMERICA

PETERBAGGE@EARTHLINK.NET

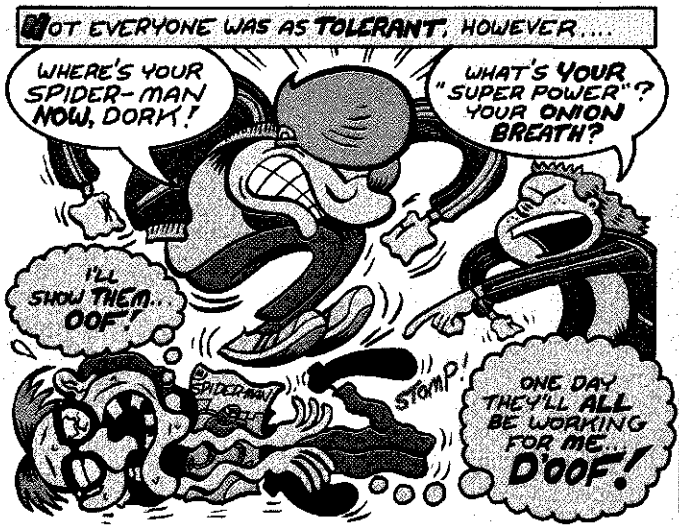
I READ MY FAIR SHARE OF SCI-FI AND FANTASY NOVELS IN MY YOUTH, THOUGH I FOUND MOST OF THEM RATHER CORNY AND TEDIOUS...



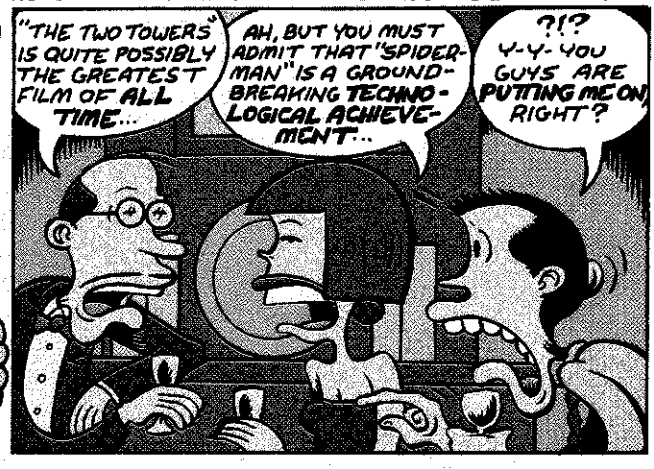
BUT MANY OF MY MORE SOCIALLY INEPT FRIENDS LOVED THIS ESCAPIST CLAPTRAP—WHICH WAS FINE WITH ME, AS LONG AS THEY SPARED ME THE DETAILS!


...THE EXISTENCE OF GIANT WORM-LIKE CREATURES ON A DESERT PLANET ISN'T ALL THAT IMPLAUSIBLE WHEN YOU CONSIDER THAT...
THAT'S, UH, REALLY FASCINATING...
P-U! LAY OFF THE ONION RINGS, PAL!
DUNE

NOT EVERYONE WAS AS TOLERANT, HOWEVER....

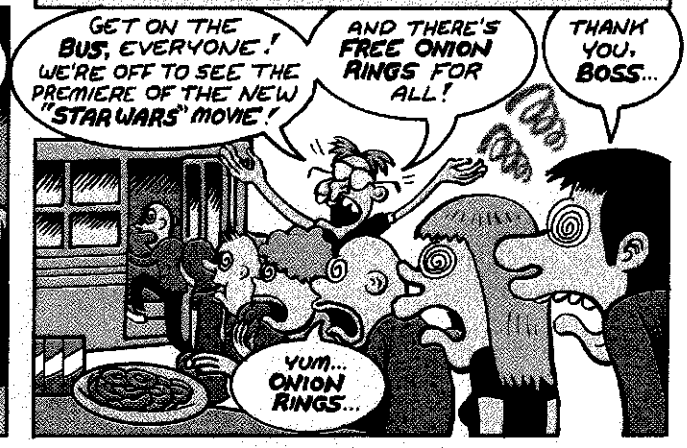

WHERE'S YOUR SPIDER-MAN NOW, DORK!
WHAT'S YOUR "SUPER POWER"? YOUR ONION BREATH?
I'LL SHOW THEM... OOF!
SPIDER-MAN!
STOMP!
ONE DAY THEY'LL ALL BE WORKING FOR ME... D'OOF!

BY HOW TIMES HAVE CHANGED! THESE DAYS YOU HEAR NERD TALK SPEWING OUT OF EVERYONE'S MOUTH!


"THE TWO TOWERS" IS QUITE POSSIBLY THE GREATEST FILM OF ALL TIME...
AH, BUT YOU MUST ADMIT THAT "SPIDER-MAN" IS A GROUND-BREAKING TECHNO-LOGICAL ACHIEVE-MENT...
?!? Y-Y- YOU GUYS ARE PUTTING ME ON, RIGHT?

HOW DID THIS HAPPEN? WHEN DID THIS FORMER GEEK FARE BECOME REQUIRED READING AND VIEWING? IS IT COMPUTER TECHNOLOGY THAT'S MADE NERDS OF US ALL?

OR PERHAPS IT'S BECAUSE WE REALLY DO WORK FOR THOSE FORMER "LOSERS" NOW. THE OPPRESSED HAVE BECOME THE OPPRESSORS! IT'S THE REVENGE OF THE NERDS!


GET ON THE BUS, EVERYONE! WE'RE OFF TO SEE THE PREMIERE OF THE NEW "STAR WARS" MOVIE!
AND THERE'S FREE ONION RINGS FOR ALL!
THANK YOU, BOSS...
YUM... ONION RINGS...

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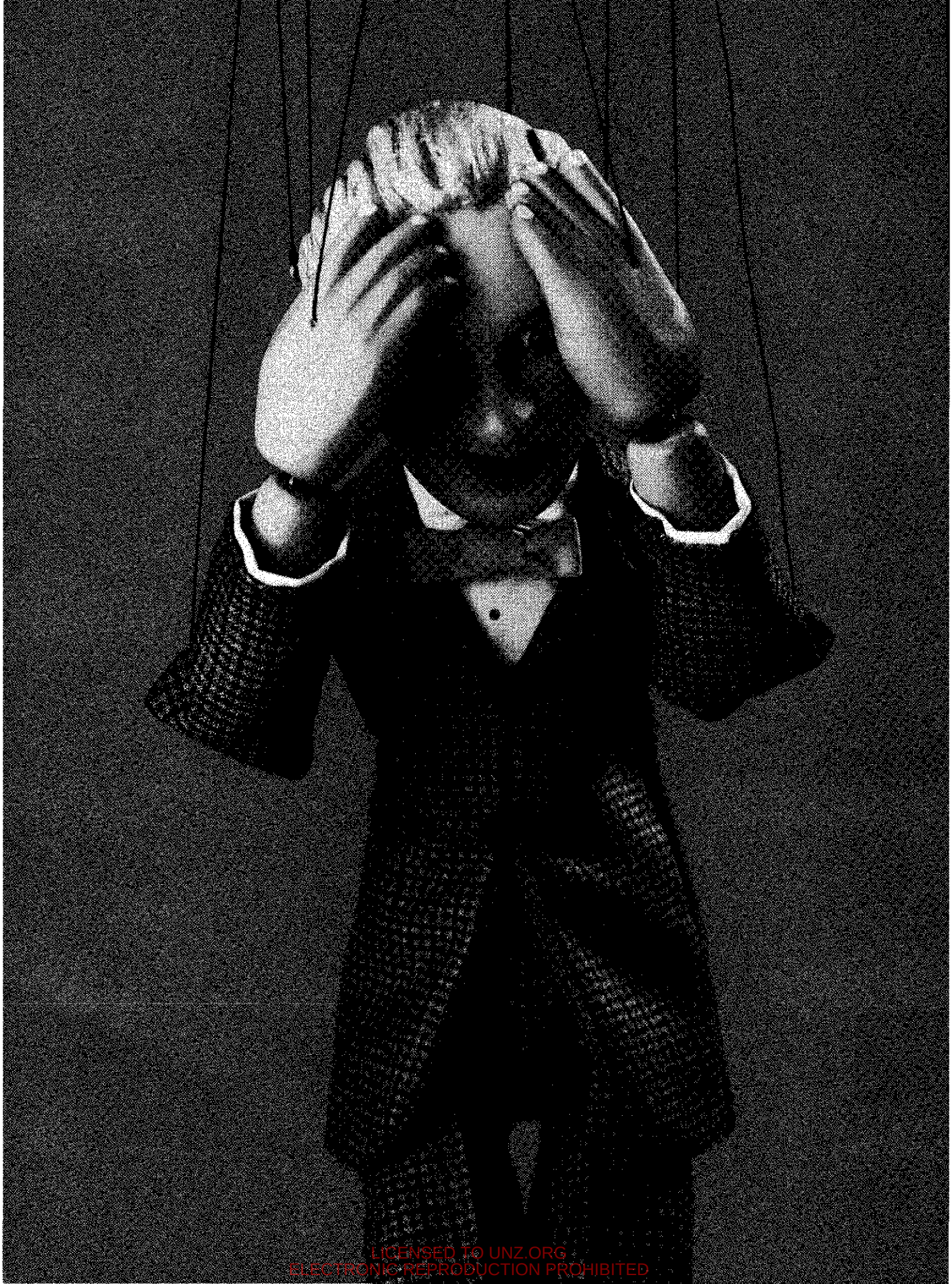

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Pulling Our Own Strings

Philosopher Daniel Dennett on determinism, human "choice machines," and how evolution generates free will

Interviewed by Ronald Bailey

CAN THERE BE freedom and free will in a deterministic world? Yes, declares the controversial philosopher Daniel C. Dennett. "Human freedom," he writes in his important new book *Freedom Evolves* (Viking), "is not an illusion; it is an objective phenomenon, distinct from all other biological conditions and found in only one species, us."

One might think that Dennett's ringing endorsement of the reality of human freedom would make him popular with other intellectuals. It doesn't. On the right, the conservative *Weekly Standard* denounces him as "a vigorous evangelist for evolutionary psychology." The neoconservative journal *The Public Interest* has called him "an evolutionary fundamentalist." That view was shared by the late left-wing evolutionary theorist Stephen Jay Gould, who disparaged Dennett as a "Darwinian fundamentalist." Gould's scientific collaborator Niles Eldredge concurs, dismissing him as an "ultra-Darwinian." The liberal *American Prospect* accuses him of "cybernetic totalism."

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But Dennett has his admirers too. *The New York Times Book Review* selected his *Consciousness Explained* as one of the 10 best books of 1991. *The Wall Street Journal* raved about 1995's *Darwin's Dangerous Idea: Evolution and the Meanings of Life*, and declared that Dennett "does one of the things philosophers are supposed to be good at: clearing up conceptual muddles in the sciences." Zoologist Matt Ridley, author of *The Origins of Virtue*, hails him as the "ebullient, pugnacious and ever pithy sage of Boston."

Born in 1942, Daniel Dennett studied philosophy at Harvard University and Oxford University. His philosophical views can be traced most clearly to the influence of his Oxford teacher, philosopher Gilbert Ryle. Ryle famously attacked Cartesian mind-body dualism, dismissing it as the doctrine of "the ghost in the machine." Dennett is now the Austin B. Fletcher Professor of Philosophy, and Director of the Center for Cognitive Studies at Tufts University.

Dennett has spent his intellectual career trying to extend the Enlightenment project of putting philosophy and morality on a scientific and naturalistic basis. In a sense, Dennett is updating David Hume in the light of Darwin's theory of evolution. In doing so, he provides us with fascinating new ways to think about the meaning of choice, the value of morality, and how the evolution of the human brain and its capabilities has made us more free.

Indeed, Dennett argues that human freedom is dramatically expanding. Language and culture, especially when abetted by modern science and technology, enable us to increase the range of our choices. As our understanding of our genes and brains increases, he believes we will increase our freedom rather than limit it. We will be able to prevent and cure more diseases, improve our social institutions, and even enhance human capabilities. He says that we defend freedom, especially political freedom, because among other things it enables people to make better and better choices over time. As important, Dennett maintains that to whatever extent we were ever at the mercy of our genes and biological evolution, we no longer are. Instead our genes are now at the mercy of our brains.

reason Science Correspondent Ronald Bailey interviewed Dennett in February.

reason: Your new book is called *Freedom Evolves*. Why?

Dennett: Because people have this strange antipathy for evolution and for materialism. They think that if evolution is true, then they're just animals or automatons—that they won't have freedom and they won't have responsibility, and life will have no meaning. The point of the book is to show that, on the contrary, it's only when you understand life from an evolutionary point of view that you understand what our freedom really is. You realize that it's real. It's different and better than the freedom of other animals, but it's evolved. It's not supernatural.

reason: A response might be that you're just positing a more complicated form of determinism. A bird may be more "determined" than we are, but we nevertheless are determined.

Dennett: So what? Determinism is not a problem. What you want is freedom, and freedom and determinism are entirely compatible. In fact, we have more freedom if determinism is true than if it isn't.

reason: Why?

Dennett: Because if determinism is true, then there's less randomness. There's less unpredictability. To have freedom, you need the capacity to make reliable judgments about what's going to happen next, so you can base your action on it.

Imagine that you've got to cross a field and there's lightning about. If it's deterministic, then there's some

"I think that it's a mistake to think that we're born moral or that the process of maturing into a moral adult is like aging. It's not aging; it's learning. There's a lot of acculturation."

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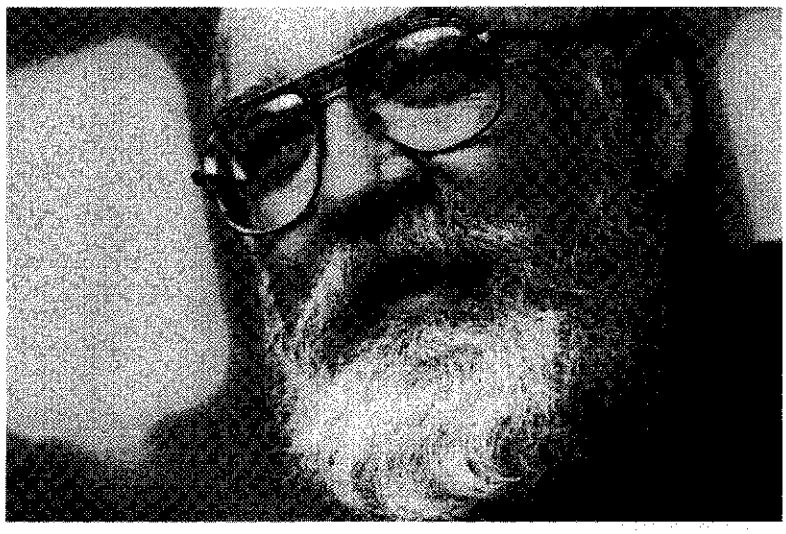
hope of knowing when the lightning's going to strike. You can get information in advance, and then you can time your run. That's much better than having to rely on a completely random process. If it's random, you're at the mercy of it.

A more telling example is when people worry about genetic determinism, which they completely don't understand. If the effect of our genes on our likely history of disease were chaotic, let alone random, that would mean that there'd be nothing we could do about it. Nothing. It would be like Russian roulette. You would just sit and wait.



But if there are reliable patterns—if there's a degree of determinism—then we can take steps to protect ourselves.

reason: Would a deterministic world mean that, say, the assassination of John F. Kennedy was going to happen ever since the Big Bang?

Dennett: "Going to happen" is a very misleading phrase. Say somebody throws a baseball at your head and you see it. That baseball was "going to" hit you until you saw it and ducked, and then it didn't hit you, even though it was "going to."

In that sense of "going to," Kennedy's assassination was by no means going to happen. There were no trajectories which guaranteed that it was going to happen independently of what people might have done about it. If he had overslept or if somebody else had done this or that, then it wouldn't have happened the way it did.

People confuse determinism with fatalism. They're two completely different notions.

reason: Would you unpack that a little bit?

Dennett: Fatalism is the idea that something's going to happen no matter what you do. Determinism is the idea that what you do *depends*. What happens depends on what you do, what you do depends on what you know, what you know depends on what you're caused to know, and so forth—but still, what you do matters. There's a big difference between that and fatalism. Fatalism is determinism with *you* left out.

If I accomplish one thing in this book, I want to break the bad habit of putting determinism and inevitability together. Inevitability means unavoidability, and if you think about what *avoiding* means, then you realize that in a deterministic world there's lots of avoidance. The capacity to avoid has been evolving for billions of years. There are very good avoiders now. There's no conflict between being an avoider and living in a deterministic world. There's been a veritable explosion of *evitability* on this planet, and it's all independent of determinism.

reason: What do you mean when you call human beings "choice machines"?

Dennett: That's actually Gary Drescher's phrase. He's an artificial intelligence theoretician. He distinguishes choice machines from situation-action machines.

Situation-action machines are built with a bunch of rules that say, "If in situation X, do A," "If in situation B, do Z," and so forth. It's as if you had a list that you kept in your wallet and when important decisions came up, you looked at the list. If the conditions for a particular decision were met, you just did it. You don't know why. It's just that the rule says to do it.

A choice machine is different. A choice machine looks at the world and sees options, and it says, "If I did this, what would happen? If I did that, what would happen? If I did this other thing, what would happen?" It builds up an anticipation of what the likely outcome of one action or another would be, and then chooses on the basis of how much that outcome is valued or disvalued.

They're both machines, but one of them is much more free than the other. It's choosing its actions on the basis of its values, and it's choosing its values on the basis of what it knows.

reason: Where do our values come from in the first place?

Dennett: The Darwinian answer is a really good one. They don't come ex nihilo. They evolve over time. Our responsibility for our values is not absolute and

Paul Wright

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it's not zero. You can't choose who your parents are, you can't choose what culture you belong to, and you can't even choose your kindergarten teacher. But as you mature, you can gradually—this is the Darwinian part—incorporate responsibility for your own actions. We try to turn our children into agents that can take responsibility, and then we have to do something that makes parents really anxious: We have to let go. You let go of your children and say, "I've done the best I can. Now you're on your own. I've created this hopefully moral agent and released this person into the world."

When you do that, you are, as a parent, to some degree, relinquishing authority. "You are your own authority now," you in effect say to the child. "I'm not responsible for what you do anymore. You are responsible for what you do." You're making them accountable.

Some human beings never make it, and that's sometimes very obvious. They never grow up, or they're retarded or they're damaged in some way. They have some pathology that makes them unable to take responsibility for themselves. The fact that there are such people is not refutable, just as there are people who do take responsibility.

And then there are the problematic ones, where we just can't tell. Are they fully responsible adults, or are they more like children? I think it's important that we recognize the existence of this problematic, penumbral group, but that doesn't mean that there aren't people who do take responsibility. It means that we've always had this class of people who are problematic.

reason: How is it that those who do take responsibility differ from those who can't or don't?

Dennett: Don't look at the physical level. It's not as if they have indeterministic physics in their brains whereas the rest of us have deterministic physics.

One of the main points of my book is that if you want to see the distinctions that matter, you have to look at higher levels. The difference between a responsible brain and a nonresponsible one—not *irresponsible*, but *nonresponsible*—is not a difference in the physics. It is a difference in the organization of that brain. It is a difference in the capacity of that brain to respond to information, to respond to reason, to be able to reflect.

Reflection is a really important feature of human competence. If you're simply unable to notice what you're doing and what the implications of that are, then you're not as responsible as somebody who can.

reason: The philosopher Patricia Churchill suggests that we learn morality much the same way we learn language. We hear stories, or we watch how people get rewarded or punished, and what we see and hear shapes our characters over time.

Dennett: That's a large part of it. I think that it's a mistake to think that we're born moral or that the process of maturing into a moral adult is like aging. It's not aging; it's learning. There's a lot of acculturation. There's a lot of input from our neighbors, our peers, our friends, the adults that we respect.

There's a lot of luck involved in that. You can get stuck in a terrible home situation or another terrible environment, and your chances of emerging from that as a responsible adult are diminished.

reason: One of the arguments the social theorist Friedrich Hayek made is that cultures that have better rules tend to spread while cultures that have worse rules don't, and one of the ways you find out whether something is good or bad is, pretty crudely, which cultures are winning over other cultures.

Dennett: This is a claim that I'm cautiously skeptical of. But if you couch it very carefully, I think there is something to it.

Change the topic from moralities to, say, scientific theory. There's no question, contrary to some of the blather you see, that good, coherent, true scientific theories in general tend to win out over second-rate, formless, incoherent theories. We've improved our understanding of the world over the years. The good theories spread. Bad theories don't.

Well, not always. Sometimes they get a foothold, and they're sort of like diseases and they're hard to eradicate, but those are the exceptions. I think it's an uphill battle for falsehoods to get established.

reason: At the end of *Freedom Evolves*, you seem to be somewhat optimistic. You say social institutions like democracy and equality are spreading.

Dennett: I think the book is politically optimistic. And it is opposed to a sort of paternalism that I find offensive.

reason: What sorts of political and economic institutions maximize both freedom and responsibility?

Dennett: People all over the world are pretty smart. Some of them, through no fault of their own, are relatively uninformed. If you inform them, if you remove the disinformation and misinformation they have, they'll

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make good choices. You can trust democracy. This is all just Civics 101. Give the people the information, and they'll make wise choices.

Not that they'll *always* make good choices. Not that people can't ever pull the wool over their eyes. Not that they don't have other motives. But in spite of all of this, the capacity to tell truth from falsehood is pretty strong.

Now, if you think my account of human freedom is right, then the way to protect it is to make sure that your society is one in which the benefits of being a member of the society are so tempting and so great that people will take responsibility in order for it to happen.

reason: Most of human history was not characterized by such societies.

Dennett: Well, that's right. That's why freedom evolved. That's why we're in better shape now than we were before.

reason: You argue that ideas can evolve in a way analogous to genes in biological evolution. Some ideas survive better than others; they can mutate and recombine into new ideas. Such units of cultural evolution have been called memes. But unlike genes, memes are not discrete units.

Dennett: That's not necessarily true. The boundary conditions are problematic, yes, but so are the conditions for where a gene begins and where it ends. It's not just a straightforward sequence.

There's an area of the law that deals with this set of problems, and that's copyright and patent protection. Patentable ideas don't come in discrete units, yet we can do a pretty good job of treating them like they do. The boundary problems of copyright and patent law are exactly the same boundary problems of meme identification.

We have patent law and copyright law because there are ideas out there that are worth copying. Well, "something worth copying" is what a gene is.

reason: Genes can be defined in terms of the proteins that they make: This sequence makes only this protein. Can you say that about memes?

Dennett: Genes are all pretty much in one language, DNA and RNA. Cultural production is more varied. There are more different routes to production, but maybe it was like that in the early days of genes too.

In culture we have lots of different alphabets. Potters have the alphabet of how you make a pot. If an expert potter or even a good apprentice watches a master make a pot, that potter can see something that you and I can't. He can parse what he's watching into a sort of alphabet of moves, of features that are more or less invisible to you and me, but if you're a potter you know them. They're recipes, basically, and wherever there are recipes made up out of parts that are copyable, you have a stabilizing influence. When you have a repertoire of moves, you have fidelity in copying.

Plato wrote thousands of years ago. We don't have the original texts, but we have very pure, highly reliable, 99-point-something-percent reliability. How do we know that? Because the alphabet has several different levels. At the word level and even at the idea level, there are places where we've corrected the text of Plato, found the corruption—which is like a mutation—and corrected it with proofreading enzymes. The proofreading enzymes in this case are scholars.

By the way, Mother Nature doesn't care whether information gets transmitted by genes or through culture. If it travels just as well in socially transmitted patterns, that's fine.

reason: Of course, Mother Nature isn't trying to transmit information anyway.

"The way to protect human freedom is to make sure that your society is one in which the benefits of being a member of the society are so tempting and so great that people will take responsibility in order for it to happen."

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Dennett: Yes, but the point is that information is available for cultural transmission. It's just as visible to natural selection as information that's available for genetic transmission. So natural selection will recognize and favor information transmitted socially just as quickly, in fact more quickly, than genetically transmitted information.

That's one of the main reasons I bring in memes. I want to emphasize the fact that this is not just about the genetic evolution of human morality. Genetic evolution is not the only kind of evolution. In some respects, the dividing line between genetic and cultural evolution is not very important.

reason: You argue that a self is a metaphor for our bodies and brains as they exist over time, something that provides us an outlook on what is going on in our own brains and in the brains of others. You claim that the self wouldn't exist if it weren't for the evolution of social interactions requiring each human animal to create within itself a subsystem designed for interacting with others. But this idea of a subsystem seems like a sneaky way of having a little homunculus sitting in a Cartesian theater again.

Dennett: For many years I joined in the general battle against a homunculus or one big bunch of them. Then it hit me: Homunculi are fine as long as they're stupid.

The straight Cartesian theory is that you've got a powerful homunculus at the center of the self doing all the work. But if you could break that homunculus down into lesser homunculi that only do part of the job, and break *them* into even lesser homunculi, and so on, you replace the central smart homunculus with a team of stupid homunculi. Then eventually you can replace it with a machine in place of a self. This view is called homuncular functionalism.

It's not an infinite regress. It bottoms out with the neurons. Yes, you can think of an individual neuron as a little homunculus. It doesn't help much, but you can do it. The point is that you take larger assemblages, cells, tissues, and the like. Then they begin to have individual tasks, larger projects. When you get to a high enough level, you've got homunculi that are really quite agent-like.

The self is the systems control of the whole body over time. If you're doing things over an extended period of time, the self is your way to keep track of them. You have to be able to remember where you were so you can pick up the threads and continue after an interruption. So you have projects. And you have goals and fears and hopes.

reason: Is language the crucial invention?

Dennett: With language we can formulate things and remember the formulation and remind ourselves of what we screwed up the last time. And we can do it with other people.

reason: There are a lot of people, from both the left and the right, who want to resist these ideas.

Dennett: Yes, that's right, from both the left and the right. I'm glad you noticed that. I figure I'm hitting the nail on the head.

reason: The people on the right seem to be afraid that you've disenchanted the world. You've made it meaningless.

Dennett: I've disenchanted it, but I haven't made it meaningless. Meaning doesn't depend on magic.

You know, that's a really fundamental thing. For some people, if it isn't magic, it doesn't mean anything.

reason: Think tanks like the Ethics and Public Policy Center and thinkers like Leon Kass and Irving Kristol seem very frightened about the moral implications of your project.

"The blank slate is a preposterous myth, and it's interesting to see how it has been fostered by some on the left as well as some on the right. But the idea that human nature is unadjustable, unexploitable, unbuildable is also baloney."

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Dennett: They're scared to death of this, and I think they're just wrong. They're clinging to a straw that won't float. I don't know whether it's comic or tragic. The idea that they could save what they hold dear by making it magical, by embodying it in this little pearl of soul stuff, that's superstitious thinking of the worst sort.

reason: How would you comfort them?

Dennett: There, there. There, there. It's not as scary as you think.

reason: I actually suspect some of them of believing that you are correct. They just don't want ordinary people to think about this stuff. They are afraid that if people believed that God doesn't exist, then they might think that everything's permitted.

Dennett: Yes. They don't want me letting the cat out of the bag. I think that's incredibly paternalistic and arrogant. They underestimate the intelligence of their fellow human beings.

reason: So you're fairly confident that the world will go on and people will still raise their families and they won't murder each other in their sleep?

Dennett: Absolutely. I think it's time to grow up.

reason: Why would people resist growing up?

Dennett: There are so many reasons. At its worst, it's that paternalism: "I don't need it, but look at all these childish people around me. They need it. I won't dare walk the streets at night if my fellow man doesn't persist in this delusion."

At its best, it's an understandable conservatism, one that says, "You're proposing a really big shift—'a strange inversion of reason,' as one reviewer characterized evolutionary theory in 1867. You're going to upset so many apple carts, and this will be so scary, and we're better off clinging to the old-fashioned way even though we grant you that the arguments you're putting forward are correct."

That's why I called one of my books *Darwin's Dangerous Idea*. Darwin subverted everything. He replaced the top-down theory with the bottom-up theory, and for many people this is just a very scary change.

reason: Let me turn your own arguments on you. The memes for the top-down theories seem to have been doing fine for all these centuries.

Dennett: No, they haven't. It's been one defeat after another. There was the Galilean defeat and the Copernican defeat and the Darwinian defeat and the Einsteinian defeat. The domain of the supernatural has been shrinking. The retreat has sometimes been graceful, and sometimes it's the farthest thing from graceful.

In my discipline of philosophy, we have several hundred years of really good, deep, wonderful work in ethics that is completely secular. And it is understood, if not articulated very often, that of course if you want to argue in favor of legislation or a change in attitude about morality, you don't argue it on the basis of what it says in the Bible or the Koran or any old text. You argue on a secular basis. The secular tradition of political affairs and ethics has been growing for several thousand years.

reason: Albeit at a very slow rate relative to a single human life. The fact of the matter is that people do still argue what the Koran or the Bible says.

Dennett: But it hasn't gone backwards ever. There are setbacks, but the march of secular reason has been doing very well for several thousand years.

reason: You part company with the left on the question of human nature. The left has traditionally claimed that human nature is completely malleable, a blank slate, on which you can inscribe whatever cultural or political aspirations you want.

Dennett: The blank slate is a preposterous myth, and it's interesting to see how it has been fostered by some on the left as well as some on the right. But the idea that human nature is unadjustable, unexploitable, unbuildable is also baloney.

reason: So to summarize: Morality evolved to get us past our tendency to short-run selfishness. It's a way of helping us make better decisions in the long run. Is that fair?

Dennett: Yes, that's right. Morality is the cultural artifact for improving the circumstances under which we have to act.

reason: So human beings are still selfish, but we have developed enlightened selfishness. We can understand the consequences of our actions and control them.

Dennett: There's a Robert Frank quip in the book: It turns out that the way to seem moral is to be moral.

reason: So morality evolves largely because people get more benefits than not out of it.

Dennett: Yes. Civilization is a good deal. ▮

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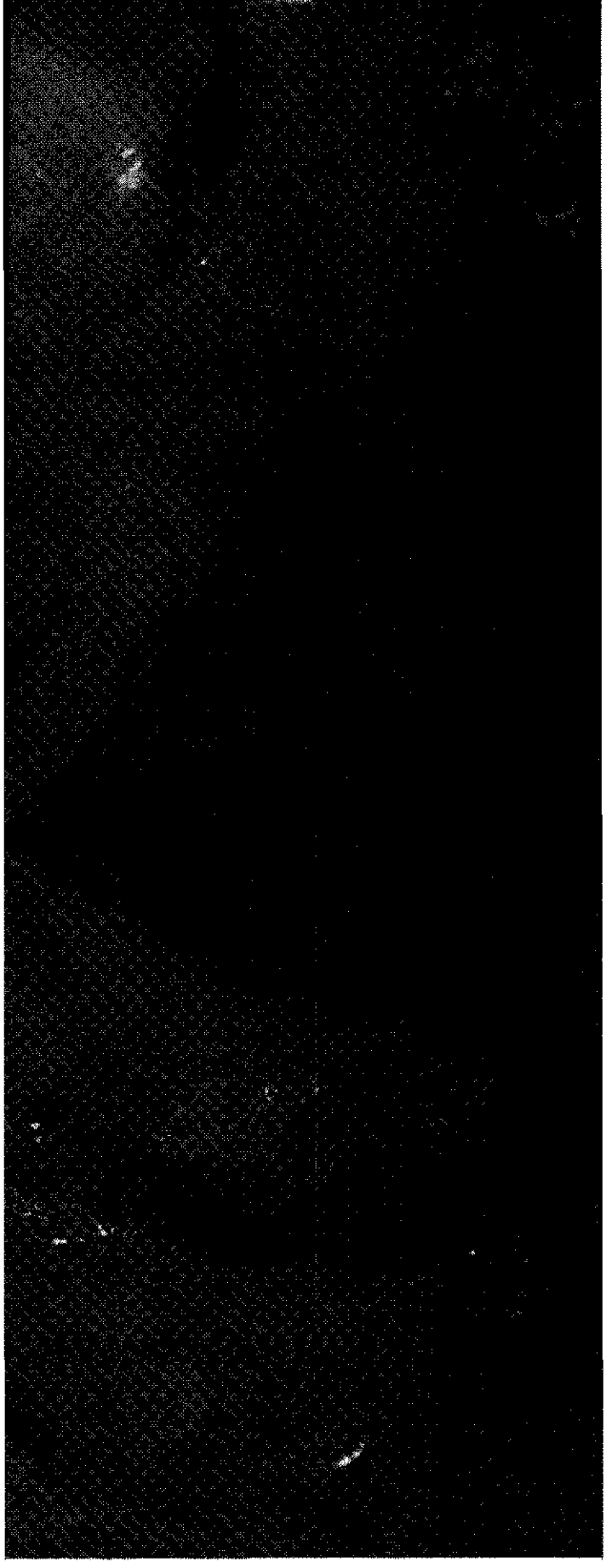

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Inside the Spiritual Jacuzzi

What JewBus, Unitarian Pagans, and the Hot Tub Mystery Religion tell us about traditional faiths

Jesse Walker

THERE IS A GROUP in the Dallas area called the Hot Tub Mystery Religion. Its adherents hold to no particular spiritual dogma, borrowing freely from such sources as Jewish mysticism, Roman paganism, Islamic heresy, and experimental art. One of its founders has compiled a recommended reading list for the faithful; it includes a collection of Tantric exercises, a text on Sufism, one of Philip K. Dick's Gnostic science fiction stories, and a novel by the Catholic apologist G.K. Chesterton. The group has been known to treat nitrous oxide as a sacrament and to throw Jacuzzi parties—hence the name.

In raw numbers, the Hottubbists constitute one of the smallest religions in the world: With well under 100 practitioners, it is dwarfed even by Rastafarianism and Scientology. The group is interesting for many reasons, but its social influence is not among them.

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A large slice of the American public, many of them card-carrying members of mainline denominations, are living spiritual lives that are customized, eclectic, and otherwise comparable to those found in the Hot Tub church.

Though small and obscure, it is an example of a significant social trend: the blurring boundaries between art and faith. Atheists have long regarded religion as, at best, a collective work of art, but in the last century that view has grown popular with churchgoers as well. Many Christians and Jews today will declare that the Bible is a collection of myths and metaphors, not literal truths, and some will aver that there is more than one path to God. Neopagans and others take this nonliteral and eclectic approach and run with it, freely fusing classical mythologies, tribal spiritual practices, and even popular fiction, all of which would be mutually exclusive if they were regarded as, to borrow a phrase, the Gospel truth. At the far end of the spectrum are those who do not merely regard religion as a human creation but actively identify themselves as its creators. The Hot Tub group actually began as an art project, becoming a more spiritual endeavor only gradually. If it is unusual, it is only because it is so radical. Most people do not feel the need to be the authors of their own religions, though quite a few are happy to be the editors.

Whether this is bad or good depends on your attitude toward orthodoxy. Traditionalists often castigate what they call the spiritual cafeteria, in which ordinary worshippers pick and choose the beliefs and practices that appeal to them, customizing their faiths to fit their lifestyles instead of altering their lives to fit the dictates of their denominations. The cafeteria line includes every Catholic who casually dissents from the edicts of Rome, every otherwise observant Jew who eats food made in nonkosher kitchens, every Muslim who adjusts his prayer schedule to his workday rather than the other way around. Sometimes, these pickers and choosers even mix in their favorite features of other faiths.

Some think the most important religious trend today is a rise in fundamentalism; others, a rise in disbelief. But somewhere between those two phenomena, another interesting evolution is taking place. A large slice of the American public, many of them card-carrying members of mainline denominations, are living spiritual lives that are customized, eclectic, and otherwise comparable to those found in the Hot Tub church.

Customized Doctrine

Few issues seem more settled than the Vatican's position on abortion. The pope campaigns constantly against the practice, and the institution he heads has arguably done more for the fetal cause than any other group. The church's catechism—in its own words, "the essential and fundamental contents of Catholic doctrine"—declares, "Human life must be respected and protected absolutely from the moment of conception. From the first moment of his existence, a human being must be recognized as having the rights of a person—among which is the inviolable right of every innocent being to life."

So the first thing you might think, upon learning of a 30-year-old lobby called Catholics for a Free Choice (CFFC), is that its very premise is a paradox, comparable to Vegetarians for Veal or Maoists for the Preservation of Property Rights. Frances Kissling, the group's president since 1982, would disagree. "I have a good understanding of what I'm required to believe and accept as a Catholic," she says, "and I know that within the Catholic tradition, I have the right to dissent from even serious but non-infallible teachings. Abortion, women's ordination, family planning, married male priests, homosexuality: All these areas of controversy are open to disagreements." Pressed, she offers a detailed argument, part history and part theology, that the Catholic position on whether and when a fetus might be a person has varied considerably over the last two millennia.

I'm not competent to judge Kissling's theological position, and I'm not about to try. Her foes, however, have not been so wary. Magaly Llaguno, co-author of a tract titled

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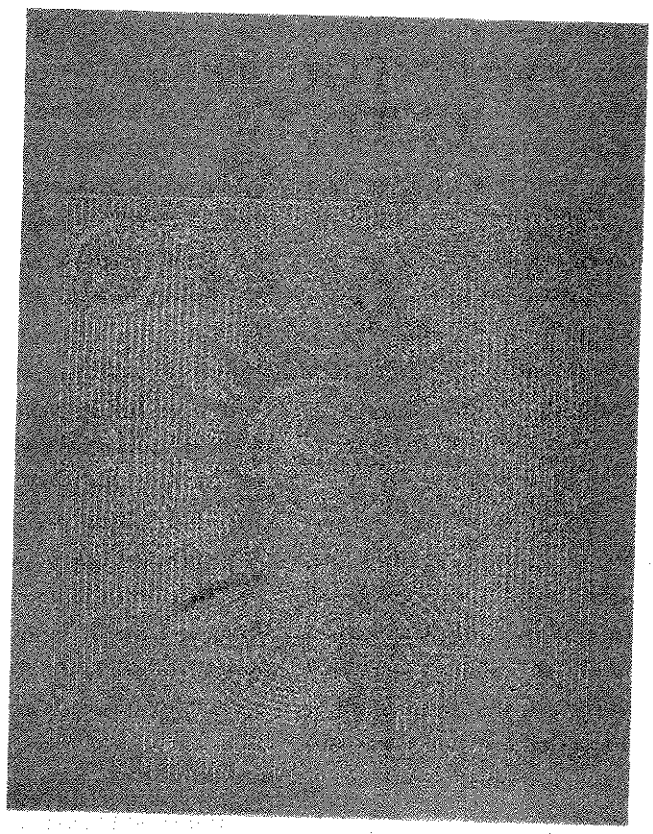
Catholics for a Free Choice Exposed, has accused her of remaining in the church only "to sow discord and division." Speaking in Toronto in 1999, Llaguno said Kissling's group "is, in my opinion, usurping and misusing the term *Catholic*. Perhaps the Vatican and the bishops in each individual country in the world should copyright this term, so CFFC cannot continue to use it."

Yet Kissling not only embraces the Catholic label but sees herself as part of a proud Roman tradition. She is a Catholic, not a Protestant, because something in Catholicism appeals to her. "There are parts of me that do say, 'Give it up, go someplace friendlier,'" she confesses. "But religious faith is not a matter of rationality. There's a part of my life, my spirit, that is irrational, and Catholicism appeals to that." She admires Catholicism's elaborate theology, its rich intellectual history, its support for humanitarian causes, even its music. ("I prefer Catholic Gregorian chants to Buddhist chants.") "It's partly cultural," she explains. "This is a religion I grew up with. I lived the first 20 years of my life in a largely Catholic community. Who I am —my values, how I see the world, my imagination—was formed by Catholicism. In the same way that I love myself, I love that which formed me."



Kissling adds that "even an excommunicated Catholic is a Catholic," which might strike even liberal clergy as going too far. Thus far she hasn't been expelled from the church, and she doesn't expect it to happen. But if that day ever comes, she plans to study the disputed doctrines one more time, to consult with her trusted colleagues, to pray, and then to "have the courage of what I think it means to be a Catholic—to say what I believe. And let the chips fall where they may."

The Many True Faiths

If that's a Catholic sentiment, it's one more at home in pluralist America than in, say, late-15th-century Spain. The rise of secular liberties has made it much easier to discard all or part of your faith without earthly repercussion, especially during the last century. At the same time, revolutions in communication and transportation have made it easier than ever to sample the planet's spiritual cuisines. A hundred and fifty years ago, an American could live his entire life without learning that Buddhism existed. Fifty years ago, in most of the country, he had to make a special effort to track down the details of Buddhist doctrine. Today, he can type a few words into a search engine and discover a host of Buddhisms, some more authentic than others.

If Kissling represents the first trend, then the second is embodied in Zalman Schachter-Shalomi, a Jew born in Austria and based today in Boulder, Colorado. The 78-year-old founder of the Alliance for Jewish Renewal is not merely a Hassidic rabbi but an initiated Sufi sheik; he has explored traditions ranging from Buddhism to voodoo, from Native American peyote rituals to the Baptist church. "In Judaism, we believe the messiah has not come yet," he says. "Which means we are not out of the woods yet, you know? We cannot claim that we have the totality of truth. Each of the religions has a fragment, and none of them has the whole thing."

This universalist idea is hardly new. The Sufi philosopher Hazrat Inayat Khan, for one, argued a century ago that all the world's faiths shared a common truth. ("We need not give up our religion," he once wrote, "but we must embrace all religions in order to make the sacredness of religion perfect.") In 1923 Inayat initiated the Jewish-born Samuel Lewis, known to his followers as "Sufi Sam," who by that point was already well along a philosophical road whose stops ranged from Theosophy to Zen to General Semantics. It was Lewis, in turn, who initiated Schachter-Shalomi into Sufism. By that point, the rabbi had been venturing into other faiths for years.

Lewis' brand of Sufism does not claim to be Islamic. Schachter-Shalomi, by contrast, has never given up his Jewish roots. His explorations were meant not to replace the faith he was born into but to enrich and renew it. "Each

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time I would attend [another religion's services], I would learn something that would sharpen my own devotion," he says. "I would learn from the Quakers about sitting in silence, and I brought some of this to the synagogue. I would learn from the Baptists about praying outside of the prayer book, just from the heart. I would learn from the Christian Scientists to stand up and to give thanks for having been healed and helped." Echoing Inayat, Schachter-Shalomi argues that there is "an empirical reality that I call generic spirituality." Individual religions are merely fragments of that broader sense of the absolute, as refracted through "ethnic or historical components that gave it a particular flavor."

For all that, the rabbi doesn't entirely dismiss the traditionalist critique of the spiritual cafeteria. In the late '60s, when he sometimes taught in the San Francisco Bay area, he noticed that "people would say they were 'into' this now, and then they would get 'into' that, and each time they were looking for that honeymoon period with a new discipline." He corrects himself: "Not discipline—a new *tradition*. When it came to discipline, they'd opt out and then go to the next one. Because they wanted a *bit*."

The difference between them and him, he argues, is that "I didn't step out of Judaism to become a practicing something-else. But when I get in touch with another religion, and I attune to their dimension of the holy, I can bring that attunement back and enhance my connection to God."

From Pluralism to Paganism

If Kissling and Schachter-Shalomi seem avant-garde, it's only because they've thought through their positions with more rigor. If there aren't many Catholics with a detailed theological argument for abortion rights, there are plenty who break with their faith on that or some other important issue. And if Schachter-Shalomi's universalism is unusual, his willingness to explore rival confessions is not. Writing in *The Wall Street Journal* in 1999, Lisa Miller described not only the rabbi who became a Sufi sheik but a "Christian Buddhist, but sort of tongue-in-cheek," plus a Jewish/Buddhist crossover that's "become so commonplace that marketers who sell spiritual books, videotapes and lecture series have a name for it: 'JewBu.'" Within the Unitarian Church, there are organizations of Unitarian Buddhists and even Unitarian Pagans.

Neopagans themselves mix all sorts of spiritual ingredients—and not always consciously. Many carry baggage from the churches they've supposedly rejected. "The former Catholics are the ones that are into the big ceremonial magic, because that's what they grew up with—the big Catholic ceremonies," argues Ceredwyn Alexander, a 33-year-old pagan (and former Catholic) who lives in Middlebury, Vermont. "And the Baptist pagans tend to be the rule-oriented pagans: 'You *must* be facing the east at this particular time of day, and anything other than that is evil and wrong!'"

Not every neopagan is as rigid as that. Indeed, neopaganism is almost unique among the world's faiths for its adherents' willingness not just to adopt radically new beliefs or practices but to jettison ideas that once stood at the center of the pagan worldview.

Paganism in the broadest sense goes back to the Stone Age, but neopaganism is a product of the last 100 years, born when various mystics, most notably the English occultist Gerald Gardner, assembled new spiritual movements out of several preexisting social currents, from Freemasonry to woodcraft groups. Gardner claimed he had inherited his species of witchcraft, initially dubbed "Wica," from an unbroken chain of transmission that dated back to pre-Christian times, was kept alive in secret, and resurfaced publicly only after the U.K. repealed its anti-witchcraft statute in 1951. There are still some people who believe parts of that tale, but it is pretty well established by now that Wicca was Gardner's own invention.

This point is much less controversial in pagan circles than you might imagine. Two years ago, Charlotte Allen wrote an article for *The Atlantic* that was positively breathless in debunking Wicca's creation myths: that Gardner had revealed a long-established secret religion, that it could be traced back to a primeval goddess cult that once covered all of Europe, that the Christian witch hunts were launched to eradicate that ancient order, that this persecution was a holocaust that claimed 9 million women's lives. As Allen noted, the case

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The politically conservative neopagans of 50 years ago would have been surprised by today's movement: goths, gay activists, anti-globalization protesters, a cyberspace-based "technopagan," even a Buddhist Beat poet.

for an overarching goddess-worshipping ur-faith has been severely weakened in recent years, while the rest of the story is in even worse shape: The figure of 9 million dead women is simply untrue, as is the notion of a witchy secret society that spent centuries underground.

How was Allen's article received? For the most part, to judge from the letters *The Atlantic* printed, with a been-there-done-that shrug. Toward the end of the piece, Allen herself eased up on the iconoclastic tone, allowing that many Wiccans "seem to be moving toward a position that accommodates, without exactly accepting," the new views.

That was an understatement. Pagan fundamentalists who insist their religion is centuries old certainly exist, but even in the 1970s mavericks such as Isaac Bonewitz, the Berkeley-based Druid, made a point of arguing that the Wiccan origin story was inaccurate. Margot Adler's *Drawing Down the Moon* (1979), one of the books that did the most to introduce Americans to neopaganism, frankly declared that until recently, most Wiccans "took almost all elements of the myth literally. Few do so today, which in itself is a lesson in the flexibility of the revival."

Adler's book, incidentally, is one of the best on the topic, surpassed only by the British historian Ronald Hutton's *The Triumph of the Moon* (1999). But while Adler's tome is good journalism, it isn't exactly objective. The author is a practicing pagan herself, and her book has an agenda, which Hutton summarized well: "She recognized that Wicca had probably been built upon a pseudo-history, and then suggested that this was normal for the development of religious traditions and that Wiccans deserved credit for the fact that they were increasingly conscious of this without losing a sense of the viability of their actual experience of the divine. What emerged from *Drawing Down the Moon* was an argument for modern paganisms as ideal religions for a pluralist culture, and for witchcraft as one of these." Because it was so widely read, Adler's book ended up not just highlighting this interpretation of modern paganism, but spreading it.

Odin, Buddha, Allah

Such pluralism allows pagans to take ecumenicalism even further than Rabbi Schachter-Shalomi does. Jim Davis, a 43-year-old man in Springfield, Missouri, practices Asatru, a revival of Viking mythology. He is, simultaneously, a Buddhist and something of a Muslim, though his heretical "edge Islam" wouldn't go over very well in Mecca. "I don't actually combine them," he says of his three faiths. "I just hold all three at the same time."

Davis was raised a Southern Baptist; when he got fed up with that, he became an atheist. After some apparently mystical experiences restirred his interest in the spiritual, he started investigating the other religions of the world, settling initially on Buddhism "because I found it the least objectionable, from an atheist background." When he learned that some Buddhist sects had imported older Asian deities into their faith, reimagining them as protector spirits or as personified Bodhisattvas, he wondered why he couldn't do the same with Western mythologies. Again he began searching, this time for an appropriate set of spirits. The Norse gods—Thor, Odin, Freya—seemed to be a good fit. "I started seeing them as Buddhist protectors," he recalls. "But I wouldn't tell my Asatru friends that."

Today, years later, Davis is less interested in fusing one faith with the other. "That's how I first justified it," he explains, "but now I think Buddhism has its own system, and you have to be true to it for it to work for you." The religions fill different needs in his life, so he keeps them in separate boxes: Asatru lets him be part of a spiritual community with its own collective rituals, while Buddhism is something he does by himself.

And Islam? Davis discovered it through Peter Lamborn Wilson's 1988 book *Scandal: Essays in Islamic Her-*

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If your pantheon consists of cultural archetypes rather than literal beings with continuous histories, why exclude the creations of J.R.R. Tolkien, Marvel Comics, and Madison Avenue?

esy, which isn't exactly your standard romp through the Koran. Here Davis found the idea that, in his words, "the high point of mysticism is freedom from the law within a religion that is rule-constricted." The result, needless to say, was not membership at a local mosque, though Davis did become briefly entwined with the local Ismaili community. Heretical Islam "gives me intellectual flights," he explains; it "fulfills my idea of discovering new things." It's a personal path, like his Buddhism—it's just that he pursues one with discipline and the other with a deliberate disregard for it.

"The idea that you have to have one faith smacks of monotheism," he complains. "It's like you're just practicing Christianity in a pagan form. I think the true meaning of polytheism is not so much the belief in more than one god but holding more than one worldview at the same time." It helps that he doesn't take the religions literally, preferring to regard them "as powerful metaphors that you could either read meaning into or derive meaning from. Of course, sometimes those metaphors take on lives of their own."

In *Triumph of the Moon*, Hutton argues that neopaganism is eclectic and protean. It is not just capable of adopting ideas—gods, rituals, creeds—from many different sources but is remarkably adaptable itself, allowing very different people to refashion it in their own images. This is true of all long-lived religions, of course, but in this case the evolution has occurred at a stunning pace.

Consider paganism's political dimensions. In *Modern Witchcraft* (1970), the journalist Frank Smyth observed that the British witches he interviewed tended to be politically conservative. So, Hutton notes, did the founders of the movement, and the figures who influenced them. But in the '60s and '70s—first in America, but soon in Britain as well—the religion was altered by feminist and environmentalist currents; in America especially, Wicca was often associated with the political left. The new collection *Modern Pagans* (2002), an anthology of interviews by V. Vale and John Sulak, reveals a subculture that would have been a bracing surprise to the neopagans of 50 years ago: goths, gay activists, anti-globalization protesters, a cyberspace-based "technopagan," even a Buddhist Beat poet.

It is the protean, adaptive quality Hutton identified that allowed these new variations to emerge. When feminists discovered paganism, they were attracted to the idea of goddess worship, and to the implications of a matriarchal past; the Wicca they then developed was very different from the one Gardner created. Green pagans, meanwhile, turned to "Earth-based spirituality"—and in the process, Hutton notes, they transformed fertility rites into nature worship. Libertarian pagans enjoyed the Millian overtones of Wicca's central ethical principle: "An it harm none, do as ye will." Even the radical right found a niche by imposing a racialist gloss onto Asatru, to the discomfort of anti-racist Odinists such as Davis.

As one moves further from the Wiccan mainstream, neopaganism's eclectic quality—its status as a religion of appropriation—becomes yet more obvious. The Church of Aphrodite, founded on Long Island in 1938, was inspired by the myths of classical Greece as viewed through the lens of one Russian émigré's mind. Subsequent neopagans took their inspiration from the Druids, from ancient Egypt, from the Vikings, from Rome. Others looked to traditions that survived to the present day: to African animism, to Santeria and voodoo, to American Indian religions, even to Hinduism.

Inspiration does not mean perfect reconstruction. There is a sometimes dramatic difference between those in the original tradition and those appropriating it for their own purposes—between an ordinary Hindu, for example, and an American witch who has added the goddess Kali to her personal pantheon. One devotee of the Egyptian gods told Adler that he was a Jungian and that his deities "represent

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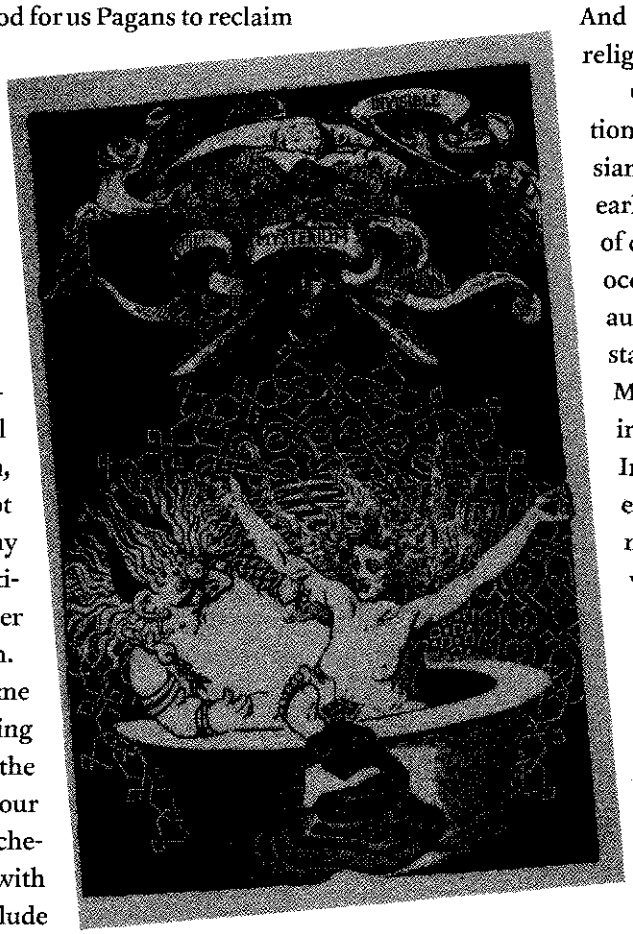
constructs—personifications." Some pagans would leave it at that; others, including Adler's interviewee, would insist that on the other side of those interpretive constructs are forces with an independent existence. Either way, it's a far cry from mainstream Hindu theology.

Some pagans prefer to create their pantheons from thin air. A witch named Deborah Cooper has created a Temple of Elvis, identifying the king of rock 'n' roll as the Horned God; in *Modern Pagans*, she declares: "I've seen many writings correlating Elvis and Jesus, but I don't think he's very Jesus-like. I think it's good for us Pagans to reclaim him as ours." One of the better-known pagan sects grew out of a reading group devoted to Ayn Rand, Abraham Maslow, and Robert Heinlein. The latter's novel *Stranger in a Strange Land* (1961) included a Church of All Worlds, whose founder was raised by Martians and whose followers practiced communal living and free love. With time, a real Church of All Worlds was born, with all the above elements except the origins on Mars. Its philosophy fused pantheism, ecology, and anti-authoritarian politics, without ever shedding its ties to science fiction.



It was only a matter of time before someone started mixing frankly fictional characters with the deities of older traditions. If your pantheon consists of cultural archetypes rather than literal beings with continuous histories, why exclude the creations of J.R.R. Tolkien, Marvel Comics, and Madison Avenue? If you can treat your religion like art, couldn't you also treat your art like religion?

So it was that in 1993 members of the Order of the Red Grail, a Wiccan group in Nebraska, held an "experimental magickal working from the High Elven point of view," drawing on the world invented by Tolkien. And so it was that in the mid-'80s some occultists in California—not a pagan group, my informant stresses, though there were some pagans among them—attempted to channel the Amazing Spider-Man. The collective unconscious was probed, and a persona claiming to be Peter Parker emerged; the magicians then tested the alleged superhero by asking what would take place in the next few issues of the comic book. Alas, the channeler's predictions proved inaccurate, thus nipping the project in the bud.

Spiritual Jacuzzi

Which brings us back to the Hot Tub Mystery Religion. "It was kind of an impromptu phenomenon," says Yehoodi Aydt, 39. "About 1991 or '92, several of us got together as sort of an affinity group, and we started doing events and parties and installations and putting out zines and whatnot. And it kind of evolved into a mystery religion."

One of the group's early inspirations was Alexander Scriabin, a Russian composer of the late 19th and early 20th centuries who dreamed of creating a work of art that would occupy every sense, driving the audience into a transcendental state. (The piece, called "The Mysterium," was to be performed in a specially built cathedral in India. It required, among other elements, "an orchestra, a large mixed choir, an instrument with visual effects, dancers, a procession, incense, and rhythmic textural articulation"—not to mention bells suspended from zeppelins.) The Hot Tub group's installations combined music, visual art, food, and sometimes mind-altering chemicals, along with symbols from Sufism, the Cabala, and other sources.

Aydt participated in an annual Halloween event called the Disturbathon, which existed somewhere in the hazy territory between performance art and a haunted house. "It involved nudism in a maze-like environment," he recalls, "and there was inevitably some kind of pit."

Sometimes the Hot Tubbists rented big warehouses for the events; other times, they met in an apartment in Euless, Texas. Eventually, Aydt recalls, "It got to the point where our mutual goal was to provide a spontaneously occurring initiatory experience. It went from being an accidental, 'Hey, we all got together and something very strange happened' situation to a more planned, 'Well, if we play our cards right and do certain things, we can induce this same

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There have always been people who discard elements of their faith, and there have always been syncretic religions that fuse one spiritual system with another. What is new is the ease of the former, the speed of the latter, and the extent to which the two have combined.

kind of group experience.'" And so a new religion, devoted to "monotheist pagan mysterianism," was born.

Such playfulness marks the so-called Free Religions. Under this header one finds Discordianism, the "Non-Prophet Irreligious Disorganization" devoted to the Greco-Roman goddess of disorder; the Church of the SubGenius, inspired not by classical mythology but by conspiracy theories, UFO cults, and sales manuals; and the Moorish Orthodox Church, which might best be described as Discordianism crossed with Afro-American Islam. Other Free Religions are one-off efforts, sometimes launched by followers of other free faiths. The Discordian filmmaker Antero Alli, for example, has invented a spiritual practice centered around Fred Mertz, Ethel's husband on *I Love Lucy*. Mertz, he argues, was a Bodhisattva, master of "such sophisticated techniques as Senseless Bickering, Scathing Indifference, Bad Timing, Advanced Balding and the Five Secrets of Stinginess." There is, or was, a First Arachnid Church whose deadpan tracts honor "the Great Spider and the True Web," and there's probably a similar church out there devoted to the Great Pumpkin, though I haven't been able to locate it yet.

On one level, of course, these are parodies, and some of them don't aspire to be more than that. But there's more to the Free Religions than satire. The Hot Tub group, which drew heavily on both Discordianism and Moorish Science, was in no sense unserious in its efforts to reach a transcendental state. For the Discordians, the wisecracks are there, in part, as a defense against fundamentalism. The theory is that religious texts are metaphors at best, that some of the world's most hazardous social conflicts began because people took those metaphors literally, and that one way to overcome this is to develop a doctrine so absurd that no one could possibly take it at face value. If religion is art, then this is spiritual dada.

In a way, none of this is unusual. There have always been people who discard the elements of their faith that they dislike, and there have always been syncretic religions that fuse one spiritual system with another. What is new is the ease of the former, the speed of the latter, and the extent to which the two have combined.

There is a wide gulf, of course, between someone who merely fine-tunes her Catholicism and someone who replaces the Virgin Mary with the goddess of chaos; between a Jew who mixes milk with meat and a Jew who practices witchcraft. If I am describing a trend, it is one that covers a wide spectrum of behavior, from the ordinary to the outré. As a journalist, I have naturally focused on the latter—but it's the former, obviously, that is reshaping society.

The question then becomes how adaptable these revised and reinvented faiths will be in the long haul. Rabbi Schachter-Shalomi notes that one function of religious ritual is to bind the generations, and that it's not clear how useful the new combinations are in that regard. "Most of the people who are inventing these things *de novo* will not have a second generation," he warns. "They wanted to get the highs out of the individual practice, but they don't do things in the household and families."

That doesn't mean that the spiritual cafeteria itself will inevitably collapse. More likely, the next generation will invent, reinvent, and rediscover its own religious practices, just as its parents are doing now. ▯

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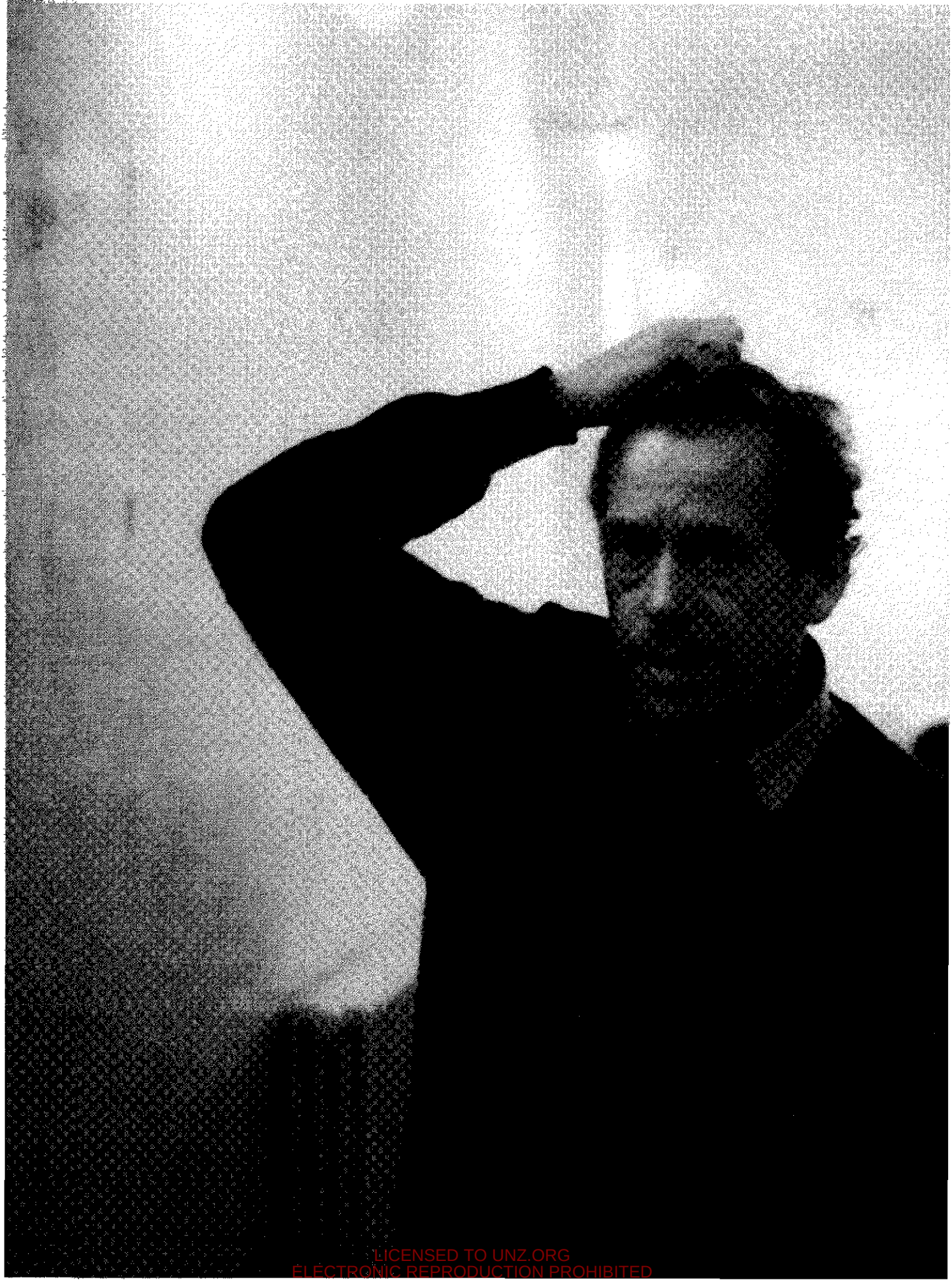

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Velvet President

Why Vaclav Havel is our era's George Orwell and more

LAST FALL, AS the United States rumbled toward war against Saddam Hussein, literary reviews and higher-brow magazines wrestled with an intriguing if unlikely hypothetical: What would George Orwell say if he were here today?

Christopher Hitchens, the fire-breathing British journalist who kick-started the discussion with his book *Why Orwell Matters*, suggested that a contemporary Eric Blair "would have seen straight through the characters who chant 'No War On Iraq'" and helped the rest of us to "develop the fiber to call Al-Qaeda what it actually is." *Washington Post* book reviewer George Scialabba stated confidently that "Orwell would associate himself with the unsexy democratic left, notably *Dissent* and the *American Prospect*," and that "he might, in particular, have wondered aloud why the heinous terrorist murder of 3,000 Americans was a turning point in history." *Commentary* tried yet again to claim Orwell as a neocon, and *The Weekly Standard*'s David Brooks argued that the great man's mantle and relevance had actually passed onto a new contrarian's shoulders: "At this moment, oddly enough, Hitchens matters more than Orwell."

At exactly the same time, the one man in the world of the living who could justifiably claim to be Orwell's heir

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was expounding almost daily on Saddam Hussein and international terrorism—even while rushing through one of the most frenetic periods of a famously accomplished life. Vaclav Havel, the 66-year-old former Czech president who was term-limited out of office on February 2, built his reputation in the 1970s by being to eyewitness fact what George Orwell was to dystopian fiction. In other words, he used common sense to deconstruct rhetorical falsehoods, pulling apart the suffocating mesh of collectivist lies one carefully observed thread at a time.

Like Orwell, Havel was a fiction writer whose engagement with the world led him to master the nonfiction political essay. Both men, in self-described sentiment, were of "the left," yet both men infuriated the left with their stinging criticism and ornery independence. Both were haunted by the Death of God, delighted by the idiosyncratic habits of their countrymen, and physically diminished as a direct result of their confrontation with totalitarians (not to mention their love of tobacco). As essentially neurotic men with weak mustaches, both have given generations of normal citizens hope that, with discipline and effort, they too can shake propaganda from everyday language and stand up to the foulest dictatorships.

Unlike Orwell, Havel lived long enough to enjoy a robust third act, and his last six months in office demonstrated the same kind of restless, iconoclastic activism that has made him an enemy of ideologues and ally of freedom lovers for nearly five decades. Consider:

• Last September he delivered a rousing anti-communist speech over Radio Martí, a much-mocked station funded by Washington and beamed to Cuba. "When the internal crisis of the totalitarian system grows so deep that it becomes clear to everyone," he declared, "and when more and more people learn to speak their own language and reject the hollow, mendacious language of the powers that be, it means that freedom is remarkably close, if not directly within reach." He also nominated Oswald Paya Sardinas—the Cuban spokesman for the Varela Project, an opposition group modeled directly on Havel's 1970s movement Charter 77—for the Nobel Peace Prize. The speech was virtually ignored by the American press.

• In the days preceding, he gave a series of speeches across America that existentially questioned his own fitness for higher office, while still tossing off backbone-stiffening zingers like, "Evil must be confronted in its womb and, if it can't be done otherwise, then it has to be dealt with by the use of force."

• In November he orchestrated and hosted a historic NATO summit in Prague, where the Western alliance formally accepted seven formerly communist countries for membership. Havel, who has long been the most influential advocate for expanding NATO eastward, marked the occasion by installing above the Prague Castle—the Czech presidential residence—a goofy neon heart, of the same design that he draws atop his signature. In his major speech at the event, with George W. Bush looking on, Havel analyzed Iraq through the prism of the 1938 Munich Agreement, when war-shy British Prime Minister Neville Chamberlain notoriously sacrificed western Czechoslovakia to Hitler in the name of "peace with honor" and unknowingly gave generations of American interventionists a go-to example whenever it came time to attack another dictator. But before Paul Wolfowitz could high-five Condoleezza Rice, Havel warned that eerily similar high-sounding rhetoric was used to justify the Warsaw Pact's indefensible 1968 invasion of Prague.

• In January, in one of his last official acts as president, he joined seven other European political leaders in signing an open letter supporting Bush's policy toward Iraq. The act drove a wedge between what Defense Secretary Donald Rumsfeld gleefully called the "Old Europe" and "New Europe," and led French President Jacques Chirac to threaten to bar the Czech Republic and any other war-supporting Central European country from joining the European Union.

Most normal politicians, after nearly 13 years in power (including two and a half years as president of a unified Czechoslovakia), would lament the end of their special treatment and cling to whatever bureaucratic influence they could grasp. But most normal politicians don't make a life's work out of analyzing the inextricable link between personal freedom and a society's overall health. Though the Czech Republic is exponentially more free than it was when Havel first made his fairy tale ascent from gulag to castle, the former playwright has suffered personally under the constraints imposed by official decorum.

"What I really long for is that I shall be free of duties

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In 1975, Havel committed an act of such sheer ballsiness that the shock waves are still being felt in repressive countries 30 years later. He sat down and, knowing that he'd likely be imprisoned, wrote an open letter to his dictator.

dictated by protocol," he told London's *Sunday Times* earlier this year. "Naturally, I have had to express myself in a more cautious and diplomatic manner and I have not been very happy about it."

The Right to Rock

Like Bill Clinton, Vaclav Havel is a product of the 1960s. Unlike Clinton, he inhaled. "That was an extraordinarily interesting, fertile, and inspiring period, not only here, but in the culture of the entire world," he told interviewer Jiri Lederer in 1975. "Personally, too, it was a relatively happy time: 1968 [the year of the 'Prague Spring'] was, for me, just a natural climax of that whole period."

From 1964 until August 21, 1968, Bohemia rediscovered bohemia, producing arguably the most dynamic artistic flowering communism ever tolerated, highlighted by Milos Forman and the Czech New Wave of cinema, novelist Bohumil Hrabal's Slavic take on magical realism, and the madcap theatrical rock band The Plastic People of the Universe. Havel spent this period at the influential and radical Theatre of the Balustrade, where he gobbled speed and pushed the free expression envelope with absurdist topical plays such as *The Memorandum* and *The Increased Difficulty of Concentration*.

Despite its 1.2 million residents, Prague is a surprisingly small town, where artists of all disciplines bounce off each other on the street or in the pub, and eventually on the newspaper page and gallery wall. Havel, the somewhat shy scion of a bourgeois family (which owned, among other things, the wonderful Lucerna Theatre on Wenceslas Square), was particularly drawn to and awed by the "authentic culture" of unbridled rock music, in a way that recalls the rather prim Orwell's fascination with Henry Miller. He preferred the Stones to the Beatles (let alone Clinton's favorite, Fleetwood Mac), and took from rock-influenced '60s culture "a temperament, a nonconformist state of the spirit, an anti-establishment orientation, an aversion to philistines, and an interest in the wretched and humiliated," he wrote in his underrated 1991 reflection on governing, *Summer Meditations*.

During this period of cultural thaw and exploration, Havel began to explore the political essay, a form he would eventually master with Orwellian power. "His essays, lectures, and prison letters from the last quarter century are, taken altogether, among the most vivid, sustained, and searching explorations of the moral and political responsibility of the intellectual produced anywhere in Europe," wrote Timothy Garton Ash, the foremost chronicler of revolutionary Central Europe, in his 1999 collection *History of the Present*. "Indeed, it is difficult to think of any figure in the contemporary world who has more cumulative authority to speak on this issue than Vaclav Havel."

The first targets of Havel's considerable wrath and sarcasm were the poor fools making "halfhearted" efforts at creating "Socialism with a human face." One of his first essays, 1965's "On Evasive Thinking" (collected in the English-language volume *Open Letters*) makes cruel sport of a newspaper essayist who—not unlike his modern American counterparts—attempted to assess and then dismiss the broader significance of a temporal tragedy, in this case, a building ledge falling and killing a passerby. "The public," Havel wrote, "again showed more intelligence and humanity than the writer, for it had understood that the so-called prospects of mankind are nothing but an empty platitude if they distract us from our particular worry about who might be killed by [another] window ledge, and what will happen

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should it fall on a group of nursery-school children out for a walk."

Here, in Havel's earliest essay to be translated into English, you can already find the four main themes that have animated his adult nonfiction writing ever since. One is the responsibility to make the world a better place. Another is that the slightest bit of personal dishonesty warps the soul. ("The minute we begin turning a blind eye to what we don't like in each other's writing, the minute we begin to back away from our own inner norms, to accommodate ourselves to each other, cut deals with each other over poetics, we will in fact set ourselves against each other...until one day we will disappear in a general fog of mutual admiration.")

A third theme is that ideology-driven governance is practically doomed to fail. ("It prevents whoever has it in his power to solve the problem of the Prague façades from understanding that he bears responsibility for something and that he can't lie his way out of that responsibility.") Finally, there is his belief in the revolutionary potency of individuals speaking freely and "living in truth."

The last of these phenomena became nearly extinct after the tanks of 1968 rolled in from Russia. The new rulers ushered in the "normalization" period, during which tens of thousands emigrated and most "nonconformist" writers (including Havel) were inconvenienced, banned, or sometimes just locked away. In April 1975, facing an utterly demoralized country and an understandable case of writer's block, Havel committed an act of such sheer ballsiness that the shock waves are still being felt in repressive countries 30 years later. He simply sat down and, knowing that he'd likely be imprisoned for his efforts, wrote an open letter to his dictator, Gustav Husak, explaining in painstaking detail just why and how totalitarianism was ruining Czechoslovakia.

"So far," Havel scolded Husak, "you and your government have chosen the easy way out for yourselves, and the most dangerous road for society: the path of inner decay for the sake of outward appearances; of deadening life for the sake of increasing uniformity; of deepening the spiritual and moral crisis of our society, and ceaselessly degrading human dignity, for the puny sake of protecting your own power."

It was the Big Bang that set off the dissident movement in Central Europe. For those lucky enough to read an illegally retyped copy or hear it broadcast over Radio Free Europe, the effect was not unlike what happened to the 5,000 people who bought the Velvet Underground's first record: After the shock and initial pleasure wore off, many said, "Wait a minute, I can do this too!" By standing up to a system that had forced every citizen to make a thousand daily compromises, Havel was suggesting a novel new tactic: Have the self-respect to tell the truth, never mind the consequences, and maybe you'll put the bastards on the defensive.

"I felt the need to stir things up," he told his interviewer Lederer at the time, "to confront others for a change and force them to deal with a situation that I myself had created."

This act of literary punk rock was followed, logically enough, by a defense of rock music that sparked the Charter 77 movement. Or, as Havel told a startled Lou Reed when he met the Velvet Underground's former frontman in 1990, "Did you know that I am president because of you?"

Defending The Plastic People

In 1968 a rare copy of the Velvet Underground's first record somehow found its way to Prague. It became a sensation in music circles and beyond, eventually inspiring the Czech name for their bloodless 1989 overthrow of Communist rule, "the Velvet Revolution." The Plastic People, then a newly formed troupe that borrowed heavily from Frank Zappa and the Mothers of Invention, quickly added a half-

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dozen songs from *The Velvet Underground & Nico* to their repertoire. The group was banned not long after the Prague Spring concluded but continued to play at weddings and secret shows.

Then, in 1976, four members were arrested on charges of "disturbing the peace." The Czech dissident movement, newly roused by Havel's open letter, made the trial an international cause. Havel, who intuitively grasped the symbolism of the case, was in the courtroom every day to witness and document the judicial farce. Just as George Orwell saw picking up a gun to shoot fascists in the Spanish Civil War as "the only conceivable thing to do," Havel understood this assault on freedom as one outrage too far. It was a turning point in his life. "Everyone understood," he wrote later, "that an attack on the Czech musical underground was an attack on a most elementary and important thing, something that in fact bound everyone together: it was an attack on the very notion of living within the truth, on the real aims of life."

His essay on the trial has the rushed and liberated tone of someone who has just crossed a personal point of no return, or has just heard the Sex Pistols' *Never Mind the Bollocks* for the first time. It ends with a classic description of Havel bumping into a film director who didn't understand the sudden enthusiasm for defending some derelict rock musicians.

"Perhaps I'm doing him an injustice," Havel wrote, "but at that moment, I was overwhelmed by an intense feeling that this dear man belonged to a world that I no longer wish to have anything to do with—and Mr. Public Prosecutor Kovarik, pay attention, because here comes a vulgar word—I mean the world of cunning shits."

The Plastic People trial spurred Havel and his friends to form Charter 77, a human rights organization built around a petition that asked, simply, that the Czechoslovak government adhere to the Final Act of the 1975 Helsinki Agreement—specifically its covenants on civil, political, and economic rights—to which it had recently become a signatory. Living up to Helsinki would have meant allowing free expression, "freedom from fear," freedom of religious practice, and other rights then quashed by the Communists. This narrow, legalistic tactic, which has since been emulated the world over, allowed the dissidents to claim that they were not, after all, agitating against the regime, but rather asking it to follow its own acknowledged legislation.

The wind now at the anti-Communists' sails, Havel uncorked his most famous and influential essay of all, "The Power of the Powerless." It starts by dissecting exactly why a greengrocer would put a sign in his window saying "Workers of the world, unite," and how this "dictatorship of the ritual" is used as a knowingly false brand of ideological glue to keep the Party in charge.

If shopkeepers and others suddenly stopped observing the rituals, and instead spoke and acted freely, he predicted (with unnerving accuracy), "The entire pyramid of totalitarian power, deprived of the element that binds it together, would collapse in upon itself, as it were, in a kind of material implosion." The essay, which was addressed to 20 prominent dissidents from around the East Bloc, also served as a micro-analysis of the new "dissent." Just 40 months after delivering his bolt out of the blue to Gustav Husak, Havel was now breaking down the finer points of a movement that his own open letter forced into the world. As a direct result, he spent most of the next five years in jail.

After being released, with his health now diminished, Havel could not resist the temptation to bite the hands even of those who would reach out to him, should they be deserving. Perhaps the most remarkable essay in this genre was 1985's "Anatomy of a Reticence," where Havel described the dissidents' suspicion of the "Western peace movement" then lobbying for an end to the nuclear arms race. It foreshadowed his later impatience with reflexive anti-Americanism. Here's a stirring passage on ideology and the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan:

"How much trust or even admiration for the Western peace movement can we expect from a simple yet sensitive citizen of Eastern Europe when he has noticed that this movement has never, at any of its congresses or at demonstrations involving hundreds of thousands of participants, got around to protesting the fact that five years ago, one important European country attacked a small neutral neighbor and since that time has been conducting on its territory a war of extermination which has already claimed a million dead and three million refugees? Seriously, what are we to think of a peace movement, a European peace movement, which is virtually unaware of the only war being conducted today

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by a European state? As for the argument that the victims of aggression and their defenders enjoy the sympathies of Western establishments and so are not worthy of support from the left, such incredible ideological opportunism can provoke only one reaction—utter disgust and a sense of limitless hopelessness."

The Culture of Markets

The same instincts and habits that made Havel the foremost observer of modern-day Stalinism got him into unexpected trouble not long after he helped engineer one of the most inspiring and bloodless revolutions in history. It is one thing to shoot your mouth off, tell your audience the opposite of what they want to hear, and hang around with beer-swilling "underground" characters. It's quite another to deftly juggle the nuances of presidential behavior in a newly emergent democracy.

In July 1990 *Washington Post* legend Benjamin Bradlee detected "early warnings of threats to the new Czech freedom" after Havel complained to him that the local press "forgets...that the freedom is only one side of the coin, where the other side is represented by responsibility." Free traders grimaced at Havel's repeated railings against the "ideology of the market," especially when compared to then-Finance Minister Vaclav Klaus and his blunt adulation of Milton Friedman, Margaret Thatcher, and "a market economy without adjectives." Staunch Czech anti-Communists, particularly the generation that fled the country after 1968, begrudged their *samizdat* hero for using his new power to seek reconciliation with, not justice against, the hundreds of thousands of collaborators who made the police state logistically possible.

Political realists had their doubts about Havel as well. In 1990 he emptied Czechoslovakia's prisons and shuttered its national arms factories, acts that smacked of rash hippie idealism—a diagnosis consistent with his disturbingly fuzzy talk of "nonpolitical politics." Klaus, meanwhile, was busying himself with the urgent task of herding anti-totalitarians into a professional political party that promptly trounced all comers. Even Havel's admiring former advisers, such as Boston University's Chandler Rosenberger, warned at the time that the utopian Castle longhairs "became prone to fantastic delusions" of "transforming the politics of the planet."

With dissident contemporaries such as Lech Walesa, Adam Michnik, and Alexander Solzhenitsyn dropping out of post-communist politics and into self-parody, it was hardly a stretch to imagine Havel as destined for a position more suited to his talents: editing a Czech literary magazine, say, or running an Open Society think tank funded by George Soros. When Czechoslovakia's June 1992 elections placed Klaus and Slovak nationalist Vladimir Meciar firmly in charge of the increasingly incompatible Czech and Slovak republics, Havel resigned rather than preside over the "Velvet Divorce" he felt was a "fatal error." It seemed logical that the unglamorous, nuts-and-bolts business of "transition" would now be managed by the more technocratically adept Klaus.

But the smart money was wrong. Havel was the only real choice considered when the new Czech Republic needed a president in January 1993. And Havel's entire career and philosophy, like Orwell's, were dedicated to navigating ideological minefields under the extreme duress of personal participation and suffering. This skill, it turns out, had some relevance in the post-Gorbachev world too. Like Orwell's, Havel's words and zesty one-liners can be (and have been)

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quoted selectively to make him sound conservative, liberal, and otherwise, and his bedrock belief in the transformative power of "calling things by their proper names" virtually ensured that some of his freewheeling opinions would set off alarm bells among those who see the shadow of socialism in such phrases as "civil society" and "new politics."

"I once said that I considered myself a socialist," Havel wrote in *Summer Meditations*. "I merely wanted to suggest that my heart was, as they say, slightly left of center." The words could have come directly out of Orwell's mouth: "In sentiment I am definitely 'left,'" he wrote in 1940, "but I believe that a writer can only remain honest if he keeps free of party labels."

Havel went on to discuss the futility of those who would pin an ideological tag to his lapel. "All my adult life, I was branded by officials as 'an exponent of the right' who wanted to bring capitalism back to our country," he wrote. "Today—at a ripe old age—I am suspected by some of being left-wing, if not of harboring out-and-out socialist tendencies. What, then, is my real position? First and foremost, I have never espoused any ideology, dogma, or doctrine—left-wing, right-wing, or any other closed, ready-made system of presuppositions about the world. On the contrary, I have tried to think independently, using my own powers of reason, and I have always vigorously resisted attempts to pigeonhole me."

No one tried to pigeonhole Havel more than his revolutionary comrade turned rival Vaclav Klaus, and many of the president's comments that were perceived initially to be illiberal were, in fact, thinly veiled rebukes to Klaus, whom Havel suspected of placing his own political ambitions above genuine concern for the country. In a society seeking moral footing after 50 years of totalitarian rot, Havel found Klaus' public manners personally appalling and potentially combustible.

Passing early judgments on Central European politics can be a loser's game, but Havel's warnings about Klaus—and on the dangers of immorality in post-revolution politics—turned out to be prescient. Despite his still-glowing reputation among American conservatives, Klaus has been nobody's Thatcherite since at least 1993, and probably earlier. Reforms that the Hungarian Socialist Party was ramming through in 1995—freeing rent and utility prices, cleaning up and selling off banks, introducing greater capital markets transparency—Klaus never bothered with at all. This despite having a clear mandate from 1989 to late 1997, when a collapsing economy and various corruption scandals forced him to resign. As Thomas Hazlett wrote in the March 1998 issue of **reason**, Klaus had "all but shelved further efforts at economic liberalization and declared the transformation complete."

The one Czech politician who consistently challenged Klaus to get economic reform rolling again was none other than Vaclav Havel, the same guy suspected in the early '90s of being a Third Way quasi-socialist without the "stomach" for market policies. For those more interested in facts than in stereotypes, Havel's remarkable December 9, 1997, speech to the Czech Parliament took Klaus to the woodshed for dragging his feet on reforms and advocated specific measures far toothier than the shock therapy slogans Klaus had been mouthing since 1990. According to Havel, reforms had resulted in the appearance of a market rather than the real thing.

"I do not share the view held by some of you that the entire transformation started from the wrong foundations, was wrongly devised and wrongly directed," Havel said. "I would rather say that our problem lies in the very opposite: the transformation process stopped halfway, which is possibly the worst thing that could have happened to it.

"Many businesses have been formally privatized, but how many have concrete visible owners who seek increasing effectiveness and who care about the long-term prospects of their companies?...[T]hose who represent the owners see their role not as a task, mission or commitment but simply as an opportunity to transfer the entrusted money somewhere else and get out....A rather strange role, to my mind, is often played by our banks: they indirectly own companies that are operating at a loss, and the more the companies lose the more money the banks lend them....The legal framework of privatization, as well as of the capital market, is being perfected only now. Is it not rather late?"

In a region where power has almost always corrupted, Klaus has had more of it, and for longer, than any of his transition peers. (Even when he lost the 1998 elections, he entered a controversial power-sharing agreement with the ruling Socialists.) Havel's hectoring surely served as a restraint on Klaus' ambitions. It is hardly sur-

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prising that, after Havel stepped down, Klaus succeeded by the narrowest of margins in replacing his long-time rival at the Castle.

Rumpled Prophet

Havel is a short and rumpled man, even in a sharp presidential suit. He's a disaster at press conferences, wiggling his tube-socked feet under the table and making chewing sounds into the microphone before each response. He nearly died three times in the last eight years from various illnesses, and he reportedly headed to Portugal for a long cure soon after stepping down as president. He describes himself as perpetually nervous, afraid someone's going to wake him from the dream and put him back in jail, where he probably belongs. He may have been the life of the party a time or two, but overall the impression he gives is that of an unspectacular man who probably would rather be drunk.

This is one of his true gifts to the rest of us, and once again recalls Orwell's legacy. As in Orwell's case, Havel's talents seem far more the result of hard work and discipline than any once-in-a-generation gift of talent. If this normal-looking character could shake off the hangover long enough to give an eloquent finger to The Man, well, what were *you* doing with your time?

Once in office, Havel took pains to remain himself. On his first New Year's speech, in 1990, he started by saying "I assume you did not propose me for this office so that I, too, would lie to you," and from that point on tried to give his fellow citizens the feeling that one of *them* was up in the Castle. The same impact can be seen on many of his foreign admirers; when I ask my American or British friends who lived in Prague to tell me their favorite story about Havel, it usually involves them bumming a smoke off the guy, or sharing a urinal, or seeing him with a hot blonde at a rock show. Though he quickly grew out of the blue jeans phase, and was careful about the ceremonial dignities of office, he was forever injecting informality into the serious work of public life. He was trying to practice democracy with a human face.

When Clinton or Boris Yeltsin or Pink Floyd came to town, Havel would take them out to a typical Czech pub. "As for heads of state," he once told the Czech newspaper *Mlada fronta Dnes*, "I haven't met anyone yet whose eyes didn't shine with delight when I suggested that after the official reception we should go get a beer somewhere really quick." For years, he lived in an accessible apartment along the river, and most Praguers can still tell you his favorite pubs.

Three successive United States presidents have fallen under Havel's spell, and he in turn has used his access to cajole them into taking military action against Slobodan Milosevic, expanding NATO, and minding the lessons of Munich. Clinton and George W. Bush in particular seem tongue-tied and awe-struck in the presence of someone who actually fought communism and lived to tell about it; Havel returns the favor by flattering America's role in taking down the Evil Empire. His open, though qualified, flattery of the U.S. is one reason Noam Chomsky considers him "morally repugnant" and on an "intellectual level that is vastly below that of Third World peasants and Stalinist hacks."

Chomsky's insults aside, Havel has enabled Czechs to punch above their weight in international affairs for 13 years; this will likely end as the extraordinary geopolitical circumstances that created him fade and are replaced by more provincial Czech political concerns. Havel himself sees his career as a massive historical accident, even a joke. But as he walks off the global stage, Czechs and the rest of the world can be thankful that someone like him was essentially in the wrong place at the right time. He remains a figure from whom not just insight but inspiration can be drawn.

"The most important thing," Havel said in his final New Year's address as president, "is that new generations are maturing, generations of people who grew up free and are not deformed by life under Communist rule. These are the first Czechs of our times who inherently consider freedom normal and natural. It would be great if the breaking through of these people into various parts of public life leads to our society more factually, thoroughly and impartially examining its past, without whose reflection we cannot be ourselves. I also hope it will lead to our successfully parting with many ill consequences of the work of destruction the Communist regime wreaked upon our souls."

Matt Welch (reason@mattwelch.com), the Los Angeles correspondent for The National Post, lived in Central Europe from 1990 to 1997, co-founding Prognosis, Czechoslovakia's first post-Communist English-language newspaper, in 1991. His work is archived at www.mattwelch.com.

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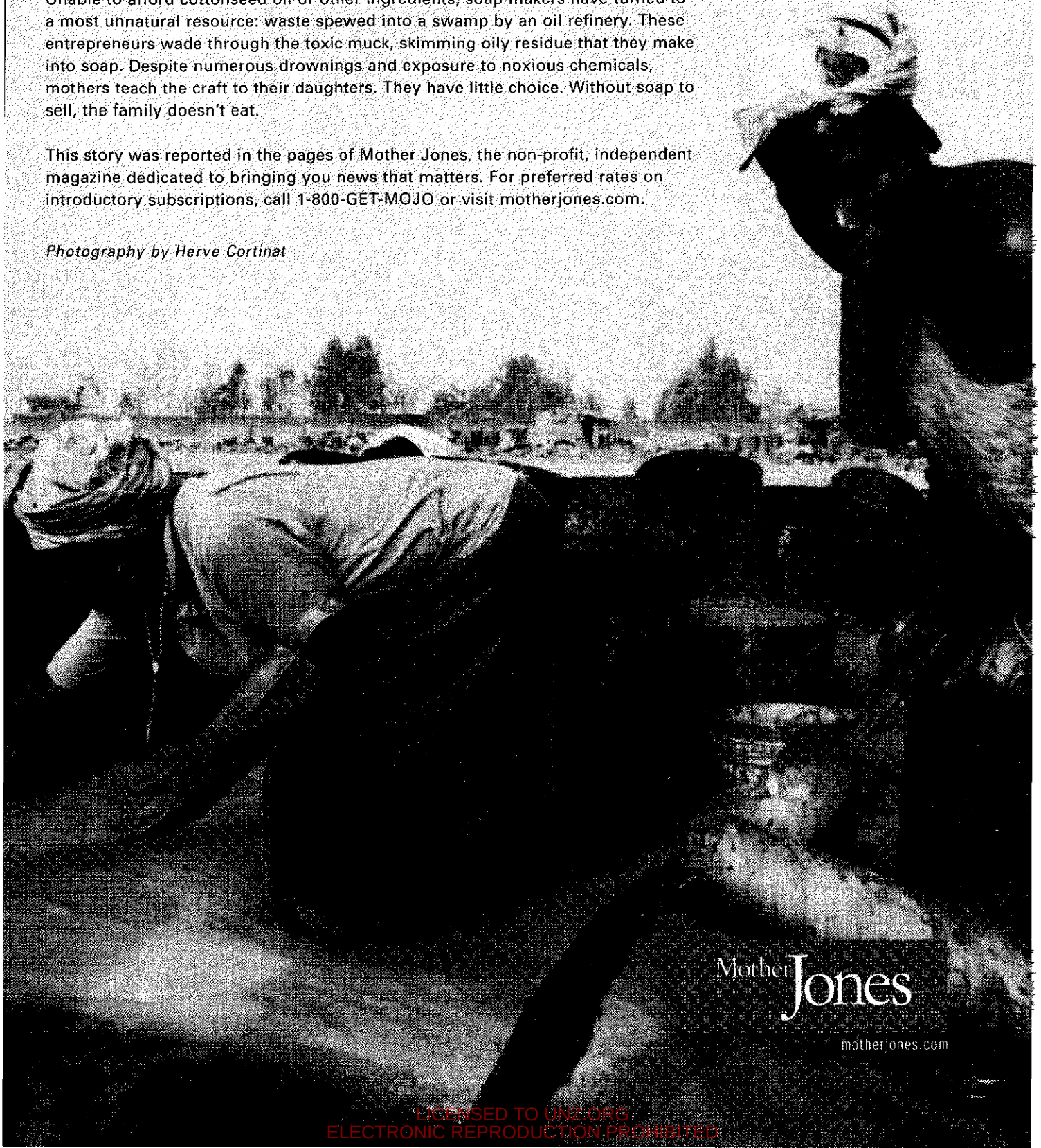
WHILE MAINSTREAM NEWS WAS BUSY COVERING "SURVIVOR" THE TV SHOW, THE WOMEN OF BURKINA FASO WERE PLAYING IT FOR REAL.

With celebrity fluff and infotainment often masquerading as "news," you're less likely to hear about desperate places like Burkina Faso, a West African nation where more than 50% of the people live in poverty.

Unable to afford cottonseed oil or other ingredients, soap makers have turned to a most unnatural resource: waste spewed into a swamp by an oil refinery. These entrepreneurs wade through the toxic muck, skimming oily residue that they make into soap. Despite numerous drownings and exposure to noxious chemicals, mothers teach the craft to their daughters. They have little choice. Without soap to sell, the family doesn't eat.

This story was reported in the pages of Mother Jones, the non-profit, independent magazine dedicated to bringing you news that matters. For preferred rates on introductory subscriptions, call 1-800-GET-MOJO or visit motherjones.com.

Photography by Herve Cortinat



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Measuring Up

Testing the pretensions of market research and polling

Brian Doherty

Finding Out: Personal Adventures in Social Research—Discovering What People Think, Say, and Do, by Leo Bogart, Chicago: Ivan R. Dee, 306 pages, $27.50

Polling, Policy, and Public Opinion: The Case Against Heeding the "Voice of the People," by Robert Weissberg, New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 232 pages, $39.95

On a warm, bright winter's day in Southern California recently, I was caught up in an "explosion of research."

That's how a skeptical Leo Bogart—recipient of prestigious awards from the American Marketing Association and the American Association for Public Opinion Research and one of the first two men (with George Gallup) inducted into the Market Research Council's Hall of Fame—describes the current market research trend of "focus groups." These are, in Bogart's apt description, "collective interviews with small groups of people unsystematically selected without reference to any randomized sampling plan."

I helped comprise a six-person focus group dedicated, it seemed, to some health insurance company's plan to reconfigure its image or selling points. (Exactly who was paying for the research and its precise aims were deliberately withheld.) Four women and two men—five white and one black—were shown three short statements of purpose for a health insurance provider. We were asked to restate what we thought the statements said and describe how they made us feel.

With no explanation or context, we all had to guess—sometimes wildly—as to what the statements were getting at and their purpose. Despite the artificiality and silliness of the situation, all of us rose to the occasion and tried to take our task seriously. (We *were* getting paid for our trouble, after all.) But what came out seemed banal at best.

What did we want from health insurance? We wanted security from our provider; we wanted flexibility; one of us (me) wanted to feel *taken care of* by our provider, as opposed to being a *partner* to them in our traipse through the health care system. We mostly liked the suggestion that we'd be provided with information and options. The slogan "health security" could mean anything to us, or nothing. (We were asked to react to it *de novo*, but we all realized that the phrase was a cipher out of context.) Our comments were not necessarily stupid but in all cases obvious, not quirky or surprising—though my fervent insistence that I didn't want *information* and *partnership* from my health insurance provider so much as I wanted them to *pay my medical bills for me* didn't win instant assent from my group mates.

We were asked, unsurprisingly, to quantify our approval of the statements on a 1-to-10 scale. Can't call it knowledge without numbers, right?

In addition to our modest stipend, the facilitator managing our group and the company that gathered us were being paid as well, and probably not quite so modestly. But I have a hard time imagining what good whoever paid for the research could have gotten out of it.

Leo Bogart does too. He has been on the front lines of social science research in many different battlefields—from the University of Chicago to Standard Oil's P.R. department to Fulbright scholarships studying communist propaganda in France to serving as the first market research director for Revlon to working for the TV-battered Bureau of Advertising for the American Newspaper Publishers Association. He has just issued his memoirs, *Finding Out: Personal Adventures in Social Research—Discovering What People Think, Say, and Do*. It's a delightful book, filled with colorful characters quickly but deftly limned. It makes that most stereotypically soul-deadening middle-class postwar American role,

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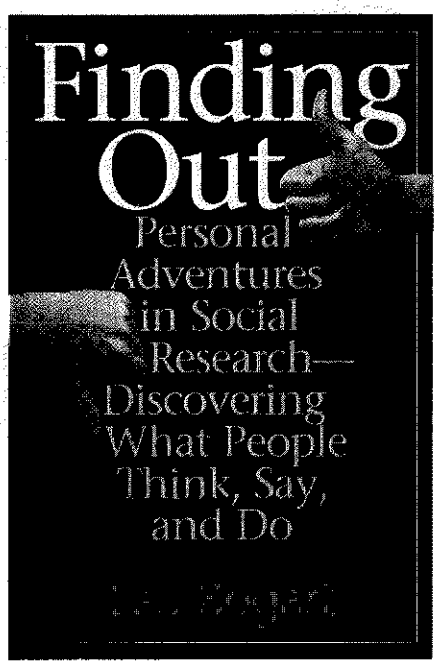
the Marketing Man, seem intellectually vital and fun. Bogart is mostly indulging himself in this book with reminiscences of people he's known and tasks he's performed rather than rigorously arguing a point of view or defending the values and methods of his profession.

His details are frequently funny and charming, and add humanity to a potentially dull topic. He describes Earl Newsom, his P.R. chief at Standard Oil of New Jersey, as "the opposite of the common notion of what a public relations wizard should be like. He was gaunt, humorless, and withdrawn....In meetings he spoke sparingly and in an almost inaudible croaking whisper, so that all those present had to lean forward to hear him. This gave his most banal utterances an aura of great consequence."

Bogart relates anecdotes of desperately trying to reassure his paymasters at Esso Brazil of the value of the polls he was conducting for them on the very day that America's major pollsters miscalled the Truman-Dewey presidential contest in 1948; of Croatian fascists-turned-pollsters enthusiastically joining in on old partisan songs at a Yugoslavian conference; and of the chairman of Revlon interrupting an annual sales meeting to rebuke his 12-year-old son for not doing his homework.



Bogart's profession could be attacked in different ways. There is a popular anti-corporate, progressive argument that sees market research and advertising as a sinister attempt to manipulate people. This perspective is exemplified by such hip magazines as *Adbusters* and rooted in the theories of such popular writers as Vance Packard (*The Hidden Persuaders*) and Wilson Bryan Key (*Subliminal Seduction*), as well as the highfalutin' sociologists of the Frankfurt School.

Alternatively, the rise of market research could be seen not as threatening or malign but as a silly sign of our society's swelling wealth. That wealth allows us to indulge in what are often goofily scientistic attempts to stack up quantitative "knowledge" about men's minds. In the buzzing, blooming confusion of human choices and actions, such knowledge can be harder to pin down than many social research mavens care to admit.

The art and science of finding out and quantifying what people think and want, the basis of Bogart's profession, has an obvious political application as well. That function is explored—and attacked—in Robert Weissberg's new book, *Polling, Policy, and Public Opinion: The Case Against Heeding the "Voice of the People."*

Weissberg is a professor of political science at the University of Illinois-Urbana. He believes the basic techniques and goals of market research—trying to discover what people want so that you can give it to them—are pernicious when applied to politics. In proving this, he makes some more-daring claims about the unimportance of political democracy and the dangers of reducing civic virtue to political participation.

Does polling even work? Despite some delightful anecdotes of spectacular failure and amusing tales of prankster pollsters getting people to say they'd fight Canada over America's silverfish supply, for the most part the modern version does passing well. More often than not, the candidate whom pre-election polls indicate will win does in fact win. The Gallup Organization, for example, has correctly called every presidential election within three percentage points since 1952, after 1948's embarrassing, poll-driven "Dewey Beats Truman" gaffe. Polls in that year often used "quota sampling" techniques, trying to cover a certain number of people in specific gender, race, or income level categories. That method has since been replaced by the more accurate random sample.

But the 2002 elections saw some fresh poll missteps. Most major polling organizations, including Gallup, called at least one election result wrong, and Zogby International got five results wrong out of 17 polls performed. This led *The Wall Street Journal* to run a front-page feature casting doubts on polling's future in a world of cell phones and ever-easier ways for us to avoid talking to pollsters.

But Weissberg's critique is not aimed at the scientific art of polling per se. He has a narrower thesis to defend: that polls designed to ask voters if they want more government spending on any given item don't generate politically useful information. But he is also clearly fighting

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against what he sees as a growing belief within the political science profession: that poll-driven democracy, which permits citizens' voices to be heard (and heeded) at all times, is preferable to our traditional republican system. Weissberg defends periodic elections as all the democracy we require, thank you very much. He thinks most people don't have the slightest idea what they are talking about when it comes to public policy. That's why, he argues, we should be thankful for having elected representatives to make decisions for us.

He's tough about it too. Not for him the pat-on-the-head doctrine of "rational ignorance." That's the widely accepted notion from the public choice school of economics that says it makes perfect sense, given the high cost-benefit ratio of public policy savvy, for citizens to have only dim notions of what the hell is going on in government.

Economists have gone even further in explaining/excusing public sloth in regard to political beliefs and actions. George Mason University economist Bryan Caplan recently has posited the appropriateness of *rational irrationality*, whereby we choose an optimal amount of absurd and counterfactual things to believe based on what it costs us to hold these unrealistic beliefs.

Caplan's concept would have helped clarify Weissberg's findings, which show that people seem to credulously accept the endless possibilities of government goodies, believing they will all deliver exactly the benefits they promise. Weissberg argues that most polls are systematically biased toward manufacturing a vox populi that clamors for an ever-growing welfare state.

To test this thesis, he designed and executed a pair of surveys that he thinks provide a more sophisticated and accurate way of gauging an intelligent, informed decision—not just an ignorant wish. He used these polls to retest public support for a couple of Clinton-era government expansions: shrinking public school class size by hiring tens of thousands of new teachers, and increasing government-supported day care.

Weissberg found exactly what he was looking for (and one wonders how often that happens in social science research—there's a poll whose results I'd like to see). If you give longer, more detailed polls that demand citizens balance costs within a necessarily limited total budget, and inform them of both the possibilities of failure and the real dimensions of the problem allegedly being solved, previous apparent support for government action and spending quickly fades. For example, if respondents were told that the new teacher program could lead to cutbacks in other school programs, 71 percent of the support evaporated; when informed that an expenditure of $1.2 billion would lower average class size only from 17.8 to 17, 43 percent of supporters changed their minds.

The rise of market research can be seen not as threatening or malign but as a silly sign of our society's swelling wealth.

Underlying Weissberg's argument is the dire hint that, to the extent that politicians speak and act in reaction to polls, we are in effect living in a plebiscitory democracy. His larger point is that the people are far too stupid to be heeded by politicians.

Weissberg is openly contemptuous of democracy, falling back on *Bell Curve*-type arguments about the invincible thickheadedness of many people. He forces the average would-be active citizen to choke down that sour persimmon, then feeds him the ripe plum that "surrendering one's voice is perhaps the surest path to advancement among those outgunned when politics is reduced to hyperindividualism....Powerful interest groups—energetic pluralistic democracy, if you will—offer one sensible alternative....The pretence of grassroots vitality and input would now be sacrificed to tangible accomplishment. Gone are the endless survey consultations....Ordinary citizens pay dues and obey orders." This is the way he thinks it should be.

However much anger that attitude might inspire, one can still agree with Weissberg's observation that most Americans aren't well-educated on political issues or well-trained in sophisticated cost-benefit analyses without embracing the conclusion that they are hopeless dunderheads begging for leaders. When it comes to their private lives, as Weissberg admits and as Bogart's book indicates, even the supposedly civically ignorant are perfectly able to make decisions for themselves. This is because of the vital and too often overlooked (especially by those who conflate marketing with oppression) difference between politics and markets.

In marketing research of Bogart's variety, people are discussing personal wishes and desires *for themselves* over which they have ultimate power, even if the people gathering the knowledge hope to use it to try to sell them something. A company may take

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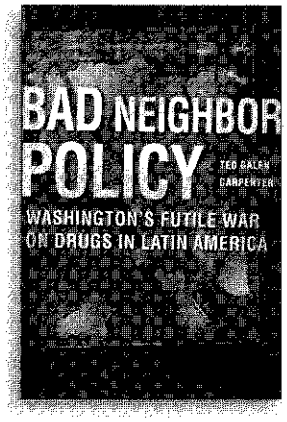

Bad Neighbor Policy: Washington's Futile War on Drugs in Latin America

by Ted Galen Carpenter

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the results of market research polls and craft its ad campaign to appeal to what it has deduced you want. But you decide whether you are going to buy or not, with your money and based on an intimate understanding of your own desires and circumstances that only you can possess.

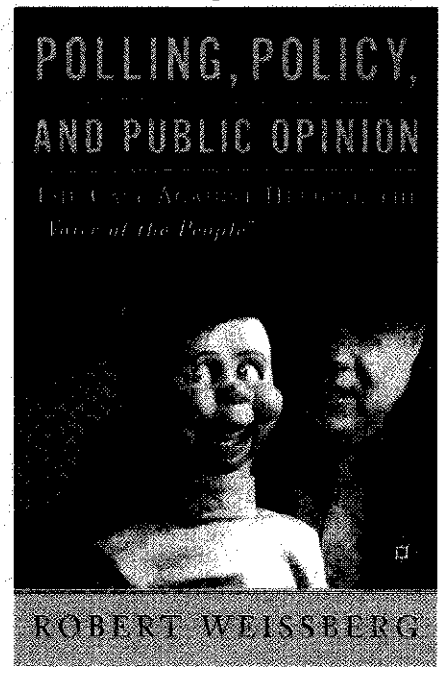
In Weissberg's world of political polling, people express judgments about how much of *other people's property* should be used by *still other people* to pursue goals through methods the effectiveness of which the people being polled have no special ability to judge. While the adbusters of the world try to muddy the distinction, that's a clear and important ethical difference.

Seeking and quantifying the public's opinion is big business. Bogart reports that up to $10 billion annually is spent on commercial survey research. Government studies cost another $3 billion, and academic and nonprofit studies—many also funded by government, of course—add yet another $3 billion. The field of "social research" arose out of an intellectual ferment in the postwar years that is somewhat scary in retrospect: a governmental/academic/corporate movement encompassing Bogart's intellectual roots in the work of Paul Lazarsfeld and his Bureau of Applied Social Research at Columbia, along with CIA-sponsored psychology research and the early days of cybernetics.

Bogart notes that the immediate post–World War II era was "the heyday of the effort to apply social science knowledge to the ideological conversion of Germany" and mentions the success of some prominent ex-Nazis in postwar social research. It was a movement of big institutions, both private and public, trying to figure out ways to understand, quantify, and in many cases control an unruly and frightening mass populace. In reaction to this wide-ranging attempt at social measurement and control, we got the Beats and everything that followed—a cultural ferment reacting against bloodless quantification and control from above.

There have been major successes from the social research field. Gallup lately has been quite reliable at calling presidential elections, and surely many companies have done successful product or service launches based on market research. But a careful reader will notice that the samples Bogart presents of his most interesting work read more like journalism than science: accounts of an observant man talking to people or surveying the media and integrating and explaining what he thinks they are saying.

While it seems to me that the mysterious health insurance company was wasting the money it paid for my focus group, it's their money to waste. Believing in free markets



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doesn't mean believing in an error-free, best-of-all-possible-worlds equilibrium. Free markets are rife with errors, and the market process and profit and loss system are an efficient method of sorting them all out. As the old saying goes, at least half the money you spend on marketing is always wasted.

My experience with focus groups and many of Bogart's sideways comments (though he is by no means out to bury market research) cast shadows on the bright, clean, rational world of scientific market research. Bogart notes that "many studies are planned and questionnaires are written without the theoretical underpinning that provides insight and understanding rather than mere factual detail of transient interest." He says otherwise savvy business executives often take meaningless numbers seriously, and he mocks those who posit that "the inchoate and monosyllabic utterances of respondents commenting on test advertisements [are] 'opening a window into the human soul.'" He thinks the current marketing obsession with youth is more "herd behavior...than marketing wisdom." Mistakes, it seems, are being made. How many and at what cost? Ask the marketers of New Coke; they might have some clue.

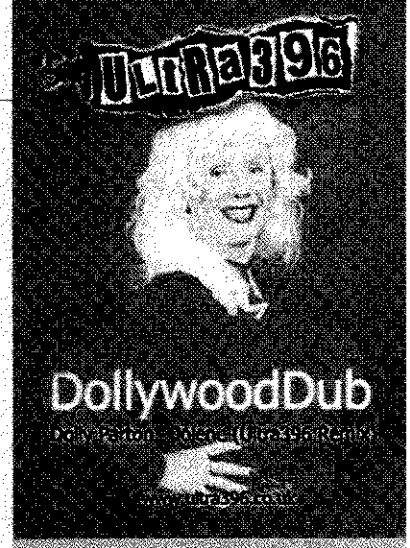
It might be that polling and market research are often a pure consumption expense: entertainment for political junkies, or a way for corporate executives to feel better about risky decisions. Bogart cites a 2000 survey of executives who said that what they overwhelmingly wanted from their market research was "to be told what to do." He observes that "the validity of the advice they received seemed subordinate to the air of assurance with which it was uttered." A lot of the information Bogart presents suggests that, when it comes to marketing, we often don't know what people are going to do and we can't do anything about it. I can see why people would pay a lot to avoid that grim message.

Is this thing called "public opinion" even real and measurable? Weissberg takes care to say he isn't questioning that. But Bogart dismisses the concept as "an amorphous and unstructured combination of sentiments and loyalties." What's more, as marketing guru Oren Harari has noted, our desires and opinions about products and services are eternally changeable and only really discoverable through action. Opinions we express in any artificially created now will be constrained by extant options. The most telling critique of most polling and market research is that it leaves no room for, or doesn't pay enough attention, when people say, "I don't know."

Harari, a professor of management at the University of San Francisco's Graduate School of Business and a Tom Peters associate, noted in a 1994 speech that market research indicated public disdain for answering machines and hair mousse before their introduction. "When people are unfamiliar with a product, or cannot fathom its possibilities," he said, "market research will reflect that and nothing more....Market research can suggest, in a narrow way, what people might prefer or dislike today, but not what will excite them tomorrow."

If grilled about it in a focus group, I'd admit that the pretensions and some of the practices of social research make me uneasy. But when I think of it as an example of how fabulously wealthy our society is, such that we can afford to have whole disciplines full of intelligent people dedicating themselves to it, I'd have to give it a 3 on a 1-to-10 scale of important worries about our culture.

Brian Doherty (bdoherty@reason.com) is an associate editor of **reason**. *He is writing a book on the history and cultural meaning of the Burning Man festival, to be published by Little, Brown in 2004.*



Monster Mash-Ups

How musical collages are challenging traditional ideas of authorship

Jesse Walker

"Rock the Party" is an incredibly generic title, but the song is anything but conventional. Its vocals are lifted from "Let's Get This Party Started," Pink's catchy and forgettable hit du jour. Behind them, though, is the rattling beat of "Rock the Casbah," released two decades ago by the Clash.

Not an imitation of the beat. The beat itself. A person or consortium called Ultra396 has spliced vocals from one track onto the music and chorus of another, and has done this so smoothly that it sounds like they were always on the same record.

While politicians debate the propriety of biological engineering, a similar sort of tampering is exploding in a network of underground laboratories. The results, alternately dubbed "bootlegs" and "mash-ups," crossbreed songs, not genes; they are remixed at home by »

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Property Wrongs

Can property exist without the state?

Leigh Jenco

The Myth of Ownership: Taxes and Justice, by Thomas Nagel and Liam Murphy, New York: Oxford University Press, 238 pages, $25

THREE HUNDRED AND fifty years ago, at the height of the English civil war, Thomas Hobbes called for an absolute monarchy, arguing that there would be nothing but bloodshed without it. Property, security, family life—basically, civilization as we know it—were impossible without the commonwealth under the sovereign, he argued; therefore, we are bound to obey the king's every command. The alternative, he famously declared, was far worse: "a perpetual war of every man against his neighbor," in which existence is "nasty, brutish, and short."

Even after centuries of prosperity, largely the result of a very different approach to government, Hobbes remains a starting point of social analysis for many modern-day academics. In *The Myth of Ownership: Taxes and Justice*, two well-known philosophers on the law faculty at New York University offer a political vision made only a little bit kinder and gentler than the terrifying despotism Hobbes advocated by their assurances that they are defending modern democratic regimes.

As their book's self-consciously controversial title implies, Thomas Nagel and Liam Murphy argue against "the idea that people's pretax income and wealth are theirs in any morally meaningful sense." Like Hobbes, they oppose the notion that anyone can do anything without the state. But they go beyond Stephen Holmes and Cass Sunstein's relatively straightforward observation (in their influential 1999 book *The Costs of Rights: Why Liberty Depends on Taxes*) that all private rights incur public costs. Nagel and Murphy attempt to show that private property rights not only lack protection without government but are actually nonexistent until the state and its tax system *create* them.

Their premise is that the world we live in today, with its affluence and security, would be impossible without the services afforded by government—the protection of private property, for example. Taxes, they claim, are an indispensable, indivisible part of that framework. It is not surprising, then, who the authors' main sparring partner turns out to be. "A consistent application of sophisticated libertarian political theory leads to deeply implausible results that hardly anyone actually accepts," they assure their readers, but "in its naïve, everyday version libertarianism is taken for granted in much tax policy analysis."

Against this libertarian bogeyman, they claim that pretax incomes—before or after market transactions have taken place—have no basis in justice, because they are not founded on any defensible notion of merit or reality. To Nagel and Murphy, "there is no such thing" as a "pre-government distribution of bundles of resources," because it is the government's law and tax system—not the spontaneous and cooperative exchanges of individuals or some kind of "natural right"—that decides who gets what. Without the government, they say, we would be in Hobbes' state of nature all over again. Everyone would be equally strong but equally afraid, and presumably too busy planning pre-emptive security strikes against their neighbors to think about mutually beneficial market exchanges.

Having dismissed the idea that public policy can realistically be guided by the assumption that individuals "own" property and that the government must then justify the taxes that reduce such holdings, Nagel and Murphy reformulate the issue in terms of overall social welfare. Unlike Hobbes, they argue that government activity, and the property rights it creates, *do* have limits: Both are restricted by the extent to which they contribute to particular socially just outcomes.

The authors then spend much of the book arguing for what they think those "socially just outcomes" ought to be: a predictable mix of personal entitlements to basic income, education, and health care, combined with market regulation aimed at "limiting the damage to the inevitable losers in market competition without undermining the productive power of the system." But the specifics are there mainly to illustrate their larger point: that tax policies are the conduit through which people receive what they are *really* entitled to.

Nagel and Murphy do get one thing right: All theories of property and taxes, including libertarian and utilitarian ones, rely on assumptions about justice. (The debate among libertarians over tort reform, for example, reveals several distinct moral foundations for a particular view about personal entitlement, and the extent to which it is reasonable for the government to sanction specific legal settlements.) The authors deserve credit for seeing the complex

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moral questions that underlie tax and property law. There's a problem, though. Even if you accept their welfare-state vision of justice, Nagel and Murphy's argument about property and ownership falters on other grounds.

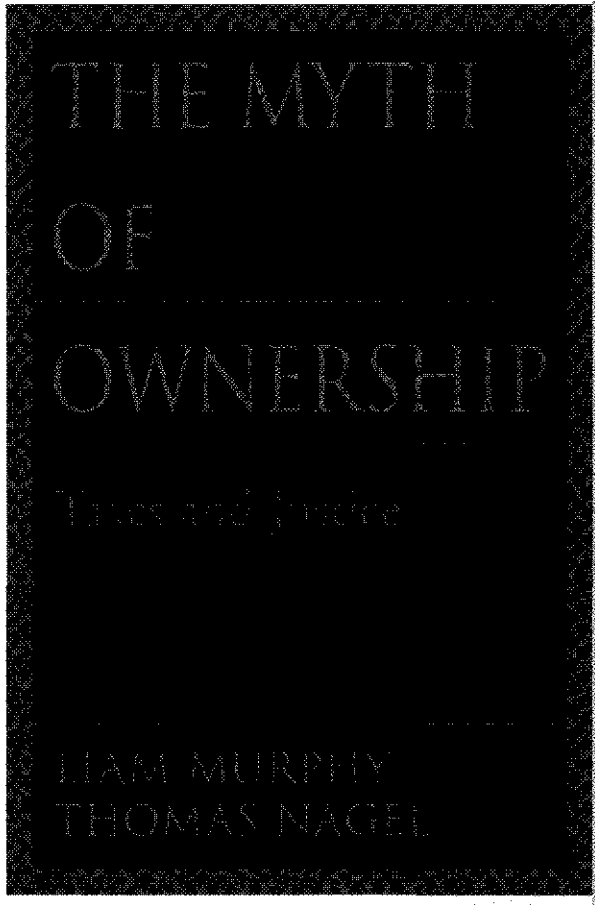
The authors try to slide out of many difficulties by omitting a serious discussion of the origins of the state. But there are good reasons why people tell stories about how government emerged (or could have emerged). If you don't assume some minimal antecedent demand for government services, such as common defense against property violations and other crimes, there's no way to avoid characterizing the state as simply a protection racket. Nagel and Murphy, however, categorically rule out a natural right to property or anything else before the state exists—and thus render the idea of "consensual rule" an absurdity.

In fact, their argument leaves it entirely unclear how, if no property rights exist before the government steps in, the state has the resources even to initiate its own tax-extracting and property-creating activities. The state, as a real entity, cannot originate from nothing. But according to the authors' argument, in the absence of a functional tax framework not even the state can be properly entitled to the startup capital to create itself.

Of course, there's a difference between saying that no property exists before the state creates a system of entitlements and saying that no legitimate property *claims* can exist before a perfectly just state establishes them in law. But Nagel and Murphy prove neither assertion, even as they insist (in different places) that they prove both.

Their argument also invites questions about what, in their view, people can be said to "earn." If people can own nothing, it can be assumed that they can *earn* nothing beyond whatever a just state says they are entitled to; the authors remind us over and over that property rights are "to a large extent the product of tax policies that have to be evaluated by standards of social justice." But a "large" extent implies that those rights are not *entirely* the result of tax policies—which raises the question, of what else are they the result? And what are we to make of an act of creation, once we sift out all influences due to economic conditions, parental guidance, and any other advantages that, for the authors, constitute the mechanism of injustice? Nagel and Murphy make no gesture toward incorporating returns to creative or entrepreneurial effort into their theory of justice—or, for that matter, their theory of reality.

Worst of all, the authors call their own consistency into question, by specifying that they are starting from the point of view of members



27 Mutation Mash-Ups

amateur producer/collagists and released to the world via the Internet. Technically, they are illegal. Practically, they are unstoppable. Search for a particular mash-up online, and you may discover that it has disappeared, swallowed by legal threats, software troubles, or—most likely—the high cost of hosting it on a site. Search for mash-ups in general, though, and you'll find a cornucopia of brilliant, foolish, and brilliantly foolish novelties.

Critics have long debated who "creates" a pop record: the artist listed on the sleeve, the producer behind the scenes, the composer in the wings, or the sometimes anonymous studio employees who actually play the music. In certain contexts—experimental tape loops, freeform radio collages, Dickie Goodman novelty singles—authorship seemed to splinter even further, as composers, DJs, and comedians inserted samples from older recordings into new and very different contexts. When rap exploded in the '80s, so did sampling; and so did sampling-related litigation.

Now cheap, easy-to-use remixing software and quick distribution via the Net have set off another explosion. What once was avant-garde, and then was monopolized by the entertainment combines, is now a populist art form that virtually anyone can practice. Without much difficulty, you can lay one singer's vocal track onto another artist's music. With a little more effort, you »

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of an existing democratic society. Why take democracy—which, as they admit, sometimes generates morally unacceptable outcomes—as a given, without allowing the market the same slack? The authors offer a weak defense that in political life, unlike in business, people usually give some weight to moral arguments, but this is an empirical claim that could be easily refuted by a look at the wide variety of market products—from "fair trade" coffee to mutual fund portfolios deliberately comprised of "socially responsible" companies—that cater to consumers' moral perspectives.

Here Nagel and Murphy begin to show their true colors. They are defending their subjective distaste of the market without a real look at what it does, or at the alternatives to a state-based scheme of social justice. After all, the government is at least as "conventional" as property rights, and Nagel and Murphy are either blind or dishonest for failing to recognize the state's symbiotic (if not parasitic) relationship with the market. They hope to reshape America in the mold of a European social democracy but fail to mention Europe's double-digit unemployment rates. They hope inequality will be eliminated but do not explain why, prima facie, inequality is wrong. They want responsible, public-minded citizens but refuse to give civil society a chance.

More important than criticizing their argument, however, is realizing that its framework is shared by other thinkers who exert a powerful influence on social policy. Many people calling themselves liberals now believe that the expansion of state power is *the* driving force of civilization, something to be encouraged, not feared or too sharply limited. Stephen Holmes even goes so far as to claim that statist liberalism, not libertarianism, does more to advance the classical liberal project of eradicating power imbalances wherever they occur, adding with relish that this especially includes the place dearest to libertarian hearts, the sphere of "private" market transactions.

Murphy and Nagel are right that tax law is saturated with issues of justice, and they are right to insist that any fiscal policy must be backed by a coherent and defensible system of justice. Property *is* a moral issue, and

It is no longer enough simply to demand a right to be left alone, when rival theories of justice are calling the origin and status of that very right into question.

libertarians should see welfare state theories for what they are: challenges not necessarily to market competition, which provides important and empirically verifiable benefits that Murphy and Nagel acknowledge, but to the *value* we may justifiably assign to those benefits.

In other words, those who sympathize with the authors' libertarian sparring-partner must construct an argument for liberty on moral grounds, or risk academic—and political—irrelevance. It is no longer enough simply to demand a right to be left alone, when rival theories of justice are calling the origin and status of that very right into question. ▯

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Standard Issue

The dot-com tragedy denied

Tim Cavanaugh

Starving to Death on $200 Million: The Short, Absurd Life of The Industry Standard, by James Ledbetter, New York: PublicAffairs, 272 pages, $26

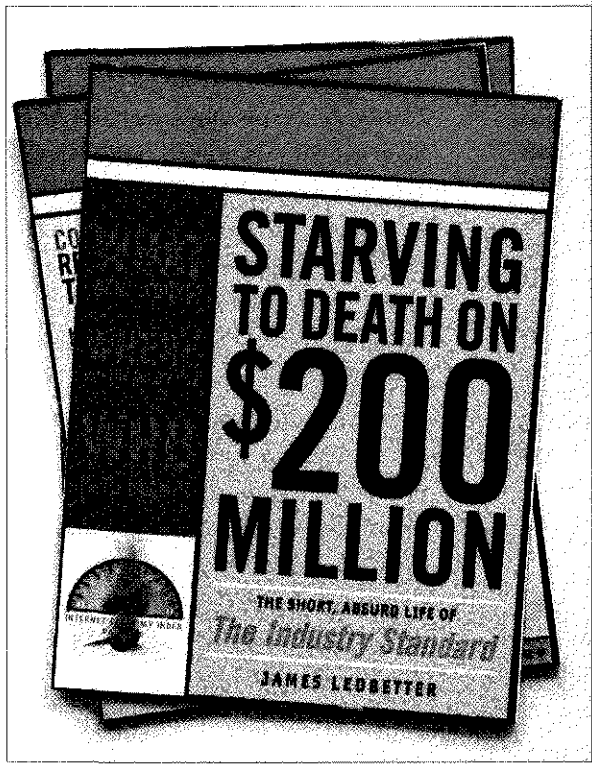
EARLY IN *Starving to Death on $200 Million*, his memoir of the short-lived *Industry Standard* magazine, James Ledbetter raises a question about the difference between trade and general interest magazines: "Would people read this magazine if they didn't have to as part of their job?"

This litmus test was essential to the *Standard*, a slick, *Business Week*–style "bible" of the Internet industry, which positioned itself as the red-hot opposite of a dull trade paper but whose fate was controlled by IDG Publishing, a tech trade empire and former publisher of the *For Dummies* books. The question also applies to Ledbetter's book. I worked at four different dot-com start-ups and am still making a living on the Web. Yet even I am not sure I want to read about *The Industry Standard*.

It's to Ledbetter's credit that he manages to make his narrative breezy, readable, and (partly) convincing. Ledbetter, who made his name with the excellent "Press Clips" column in *The Village Voice*, joined the *Standard* soon after its 1998 launch, quickly working his way up from New York bureau chief to editor of the magazine's short-lived European edition. His talent for making a succinct story out of conflicting narratives, his understanding of the personalities and money troubles that shaped his subject, and his journalistic decency all help make this one of the more engaging "what I saw at the dot-com revolution" chronicles. But the question is whether the subject matter rises to the level of Ledbetter's talents. In arguing for his subject's uniqueness, he misses the archetypal qualities that make the *Standard* a model tale of the late '90s.

I was never involved with *The Industry Standard*, having pissed away whatever work opportunities I may have had first by telling Editor-in-Chief Jonathan Weber at a party how much I liked the way his magazine smelled (It's true! Early issues of the *Standard* emitted a pleasing new-car odor), then by writing a negative article about *Standard* columnist Michael Wolff, author of the early (1998) dot-bomb diary *Burn Rate*. But the magazine's hullabaloo was inescapable for a year or so. While most of that excitement was just the Gatsbyesque sizzle of a fat, ad-rich magazine, the *Standard* also displayed a high degree of professionalism and a bracing skepticism about the tech boom that made it unique in its genre. If nothing else, the magazine boasted a sharp editorial team.

That team's behavior makes for an interesting denouement in a book that is in some respects all denouement. As the *Standard* went



can alter one or both to make the fit more snug (in Dsico's "I Need to Be Sedated," the Ramones' punk vocals have become more ethereal to match their new electronic backdrop) or more jarring (when DJ Andy Crane paired a Method Man rap with the theme from *The Muppet Show*, he chopped up the latter a bit, in what I can only assume was an attempt to make my brain hurt). With still more effort, you can create even more elaborate bootlegs: Osymyso's "Intro Introspection," for example, spends 12 minutes fusing the introductions of well-known songs. But the real difference between "Rock the Party" and "Intro Introspection" isn't a matter of increased effort—just increased inspiration.

Nor is music all that gets mashed. The Web contains a host of political remixes, in which politicians' and newscasters' words are recombined to satiric and/or sophomoric effect. In one early example of this subgenre, Ronald Reagan rhapsodized about poisoned meat. More recently, Bill Clinton has fielded questions about his "seven pounds of semen" and George W. Bush has declared America the center of world evil.

Interestingly, some of the same artists who benefited from the sampling boom of the '80s have been less than tolerant of their younger brethren. And no, they don't reserve their ire for those who didn't ask permission to use their work. The Belgian duo 2manydjs, a.k.a. »

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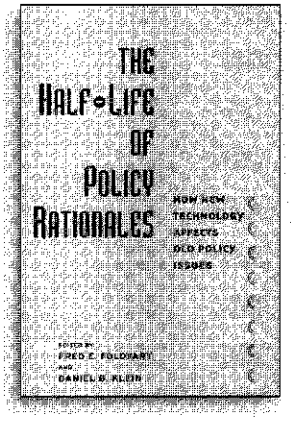

The Half-Life of Policy Rationales

Edited by Fred B. Foldvary and Daniel B. Klein

In *The Half-Life of Policy Rationales: How New Technology Affects Old Policy Issues*, 15 distinguished contributors argue that the appropriateness of government regulations depends on the state of modern technology. As technology advances, the rationales for many long-standing regulatory interventions dissolve. Although some have argued that the market sometimes fails to secure quality and safety, the authors contend that as new technology develops, the role government must play in such matters as environmental protection, consumer health and safety, and regulation of utilities is significantly reduced. 276 pp./$20.00 paper
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belly-up, principal players such as Weber and John Battelle, the magazine's visionary founder, worked hard to guarantee themselves a range of golden parachute deals. Ledbetter, while he acknowledges this as unseemly behavior, understands the impulse. Having been screwed several times in start-up bust-ups, I do too. Somewhere out there in cyberspace floats a $25,000 signing bonus that never found its way into my bank account!

More troublesome is the behavior of IDG, which funded and maintained a controlling interest in *The Industry Standard*. IDG's decision to pull the plug on the magazine in the summer of 2001 is the book's climax. It's also a business mystery: Why would a bottom-line-driven publisher terminate a magazine that, in Ledbetter's telling, had sold 1,000 more ad pages than *Fortune* in the previous year and had been valued by a guesstimating outsider at $300 million to $450 million?

By going down the toilet when it did, *The Industry Standard* indeed proved itself the standard of its particular industry.

The easy explanation is a culture clash: The blinkered suits at IDG failed to appreciate what a valuable property they had, while the *Standard* staff intoxicated itself with visions of galactic business transformation and seemingly limitless growth. If you are unfamiliar with the sort of oracular notions circulating about the "New Economy" in the late 1990s, there is no room to go into it here; suffice it to say that believing e-commerce had fundamentally altered the principles of economics even down to the basics of supply and demand did not seem entirely crazy at the time. It's easy to see why a company populated by trade paper drones would not accept that vision. At the first sign of trouble, IDG chose to suck the marrow from the *Standard*'s bones rather than keep its mutant offspring alive.

Ledbetter, with some qualifications (he prides himself on being hard-headed about matters of dollars and cents), accepts this version. I'm not so sure. While I'm ready to accept IDG as the villain in this particular story, I came away more sympathetic to the corporate suits than I had expected. Not because I don't believe in the Internet vision, but because I don't believe in *The Industry Standard*.

This is a brutal judgment, because the *Standard* really was the best in its class. But the class in question—Internet business magazines—was exceedingly large. Without taxing my memory, I can name *Fast Company*, *Business 2.0*, *Upside*, *eCompany Now*, *Red Herring*, and a few lesser lights like *Smart Business* and *Context*. If we throw in hybrid business/consumer books published as subsidiaries of larger magazines, we get oddities like *Time Digital* (renamed *ON*) and *Forbes Digital Tool*, the Web-only adjunct of *Forbes* that deserves praise for bearing not only the worst title of any Internet publication but the worst title of anything ever in the history of the universe. At the far reaches we find general interest Internet mags like *Yahoo! Internet Life* (whose circulation at one time reached well into the trillions), *Shift*, and a host of others I remember now not by name but by typeface.

It may seem a left-handed compliment to say *The Industry Standard* was by far the best and most professional of this lot, but I mean it sin-

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cerely. The problem is that this still doesn't mean the *Standard* ever really mattered.

Ledbetter early on rejects the analogy between the *Standard* and the average failed Web start-up, contending that the *Standard* had a viable and (for a while) extremely lucrative business plan. This is a variation on the joke that it's a slowdown when your neighbor's out of work but a recession when you're out of work. A well-laid business plan is no guarantee against the disappearance of the industry on which the plan is based. This is nowhere more apparent than in an advertising-driven business. (I also question, based on some chronological assumptions in the book, whether Ledbetter even now fully understands when and how the New Economy or at least the dot-com version of it peaked and when it really died.) The author doesn't even make the obvious joke that, by going down the toilet when it did, the magazine proved itself the standard of its particular industry.

Lacking business intrigue, we're left with what venture capitalists used to call "the story." The *Standard*'s story isn't a particularly bad one, but the dot-com saga overall is lacking in the kind of outsize characters who make for a great business narrative. The odious Michael Wolff served as his own villain in *Burn Rate*, but that's not the same thing. A handful of e-commerce giants—Earthlink's soulful founder Sky Dayton and Amazon's always-game Jeff Bezos among them—spring to mind as compelling Internet eccentrics. Ironically, the most convincing visionary-cum-impresario was another magazine publisher: *Wired*'s Louis Rossetto.

This is important not just because *The Industry Standard* and its cousins were epiphenomena of *Wired* but because the two define differing approaches to the digital revolution. By any normal yardstick, the *Standard*'s business plan was more sensible, quantifiable, and logical than *Wired*'s tissue of vatic statements and whirling-dervish enthusiasms. But as the smoke settles, it turns out *Wired* wasn't just more inspiring; it was more accurate.

To be fair, this accuracy was partly a result of *Wired*'s tendency to traffic in unfalsifiable pronouncements. But it's also a function of that magazine's refusal to pin itself to any particular technology or industry, instead selling the story of a "long boom," of a full-scale transformation of finance, politics, medicine, media, warfare, philosophy—essentially, of every conceivable aspect of society. The *Standard*, intentionally or not, was anchored to the notion that a particular industry—the dot-coms—would be the main engine of transformation. That bet turned out to be wrong, at least for now. But it's no exaggeration to say that the last 10 years have seen a revolution very much on the lines *Wired*'s early issues laid out, and that we're still far closer to the beginning than the end of that revolution. It was this absolute rightness on the big picture that allowed *Wired* to be so often spectacularly wrong on the details. (For instance, I'm still waiting for America Online's death, predicted with some regularity in *Wired*'s pages, to come true.)

We shouldn't condemn the *Standard* for not being another magazine, but the magazine it actually was may not tell us much about the recent past or the digital future. The history James Ledbetter tells—of absurd buzzwords, squabbles over work stations, sky-high domain-name purchases, office break-ins with stolen computers (a ubiquitous though unremarked phenomenon of the dot-com experience)—ultimately tells us more about the era than did *The Industry Standard* itself.

Tim Cavanaugh (tcavanaugh@reason.com) is **reason***'s Web editor.*

>> Monster Mash, 62

Soulwax, spent nearly three years trying to clear the rights to all the records it intended to use on a mash-ups album. Along the way, it discovered that "a certain very well known hip-hop trio from New York, for instance, who once encountered some copyright-lawsuits of their own, will never, ever license one of their tracks for any compilation."

The trio in question—the Beastie Boys—was not the only act to deny the remixers a right it has no qualms demanding for itself. So did Beck, the Chemical Brothers, and the Notorious B.I.G., among other heavy samplers. Beck partially redeems himself, if industry rumors are true, by having helped convince his label not to sue RTMark for its *Deconstructing Beck* CD, which consists entirely of radically reassembled Beck tracks. Still, a ladder-pulling strategy appears to be at work.

Maybe that's hypocritical, and maybe it's just a part of the aging process—as a once-controversial practice becomes accepted, a new group of upstarts comes along. If that's the case, there's little reason to expect it to stop now. In 20 years, Ultra396's heirs might be suing someone for appropriating "Rock the Party" without their permission. "Bah," they'll complain. "Doesn't anyone respect the rights of authors anymore?"

Associate Editor Jesse Walker (jwalker@reason.com) is author of Rebels on the Air: An Alternative History of Radio in America (NYU Press).

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Make Mine Mutants!

Marvel comics and plenitude in contemporary America

Nick Gillespie

DESPITE BEING WIDELY panned, the latest movie based on a Marvel comic book, *Daredevil*, was the No. 1 movie in America for the first two weeks of its release, pulling in some $74 million in ticket sales during that period. While *Daredevil*'s Dr. Doom-like grip on the top slot predictably loosened with time (it's No. 3 as of this writing), Marvel-inspired movie madness won't be disappearing anytime soon.

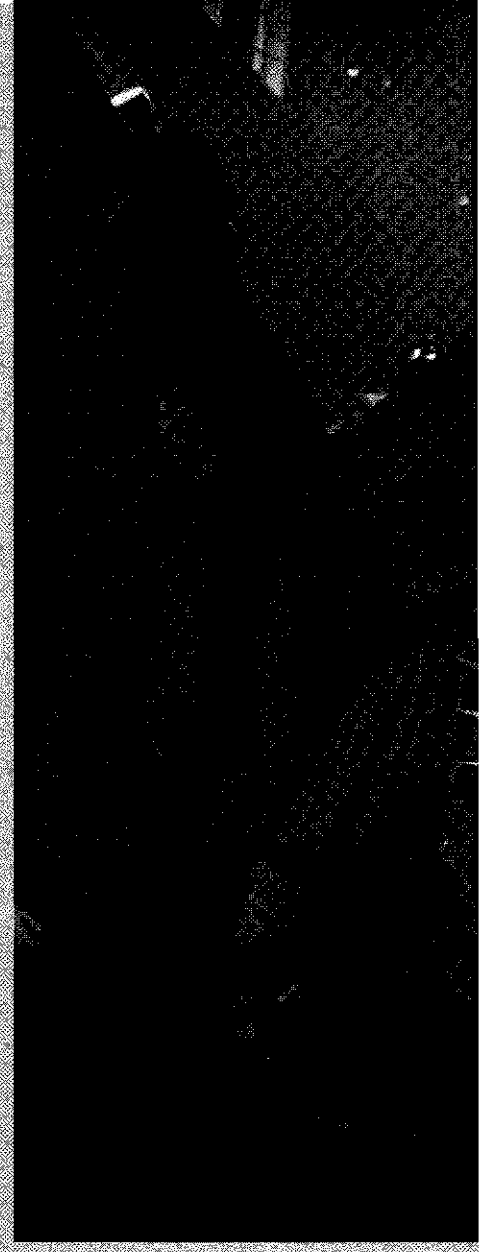
Last year's *Spider-Man* put over $400 million worth of asses in U.S. theaters, enough to garner the No. 5 spot on the all-time domestic box office chart; the foreign take basically doubled that fat amount. The surefire hit sequel to 2000's wildly popular *X-Men* flick arrives in May, and A-list director Ang Lee's much anticipated *The Incredible Hulk* follows in June. These days, mega-sized movie mobs seem to be shouting what a few decades ago only a small, shunned subculture of comics readers dared whisper: "Make Mine Marvel!"

This is, to say the least, an interesting turn of events, one that is on the face of it every bit as surprising and unbelievable as a bad comic book plot. After all, Marvel only recently suffered one of the more spectacular flame-outs in recent corporate history, sliding into receivership during the cash-crazy 1990s and generally being given up for dead (see "Smash! Pow! Bam!," October 2002). Part of Marvel's renaissance is due to the smart team that oversaw the company's emergence from bankruptcy in 1998. The suits have made a strategic decision to treat Marvel, which owns the rights to almost 5,000 characters, as something like an intellectual property warehouse. By shifting the focus to licensing properties and rebuilding its comic book core, Marvel is allowing creative talent to flourish while minimizing risk to investors.

But savvy business practices only take you so far as an explanation for *cultural* ascendancy. Nor can Marvel's success simply be attributed to an endless appetite for films about just *any* sort of costumed do-gooders. After all, the two main movie franchises inspired by Marvel's distinguished competition, DC Comics, have been sucking on kryptonite for years.

After starting off strong, the *Superman* series fizzled out with 1987's *Superman IV: The Quest for Peace*, a neutron bomb of a flick that left theaters standing while killing off the few remaining fans of Man of Steel cinema. Similarly, 1997's *Batman & Robin*, the last installment in a series that demonstrates the law of diminishing returns better than most economic textbooks could ever hope to, managed to turn away the masses far more effectively than Fredric Wertham's homophobic declamations in *Seduction of the Innocent*.

A larger reason for Marvel's success may be that mainstream American society is more fully engaging the themes that have made Marvel Comics unique since the early '60s, when most of its signature characters first appeared. "The Mighty Marvel Universe"—to use a phrase coined by the comic book company's legendary auteur Stan Lee—has always been a place of relentless human mutation and transformation that simultaneously terrifies, individualizes, and



empowers. This vision proved so appealing that it became dominant throughout superhero comics.

We all know the Marvel origin stories by now: After being bitten by a radioactive spider, Peter Parker develops superstrength and more; after being belted with "gamma rays," Bruce Banner turns into the Incredible Hulk, a green-skinned rageaholic with a heart of gold; Wolverine (see above) and the other X-Men are of a wholly different race (*homo superior*), and born with their distinctive powers and their distinctive bodies. Matt Murdock, Daredevil's alter ego, is blinded by radioactive waste but

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emerges with extra-keen senses of hearing, smell, touch, and taste. In Marvel comics, precisely that which makes someone an individual alienates him from others (who can Spider-Man confide in?), even as it makes him interesting (who would read about just plain old Peter Parker?).

To engage the Marvel Universe is to contemplate an intriguing existentialist koan, an insoluble riddle about individual identity, community, and especially wild self-transformation—something as potentially liberating as it is anxiety-inducing. How does a person, much less a society, balance these things, which are often at loggerheads with one another?

To engage the Marvel Universe is also to engage our contemporary world, which anthropologist Grant McCracken has convincingly argued is characterized by "plenitude," or "the quickening speciation of social types." McCracken's Web book, *Plenitude*, is available online at www.cultureby.com; so is a related text, aptly called *Transformation*. Pick any category of humans, McCracken says—seniors, or teens, or goths, or gays, or straights—and there are more identities available to more individuals than ever before.

Sometimes such speciation is forced on us, but we also readily mutate ourselves these days, in search of pleasure, individuality, and new experiences. As important, this transformation process is never fully under our control, even as we strive to direct it through ever-varied patterns of culture making and operations small and large, figurative and literal.

Spider-Man, the Hulk, the X-Men, Daredevil—that's us on the big screen. No wonder we're packing the theaters to watch. ■

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Potter Mouths

Charles Paul Freund

DO SEQUENCES LIKE this one from *Harry Potter and the Chamber of Secrets* turn their young viewers into dolts? Some French filmmakers and critics think so. "I go very often to schools," director Bertrand Tavernier recently told the BBC, "and I have found a lot of young kids have difficulties in analyzing a concept, an idea, in a film." Why? It's the effects. "If the technology is controlling us, it will transform us into stupid children, and in a way, part of the American cinema does that."

If that were possible, French movies would long ago have stupefied the world. Frenchman George Melies invented special effects in the 19th century, while his countrymen the Lumiere brothers astonished early audiences with commonplace documentary footage. The fact is that new technologies are often used for play and pleasure; as they mature, they become part of the fine-arts hierarchy. Sound, photographic, and film technologies, among others, have all followed this path; now comes digital's turn.

"It is a non-culture," Gallic critic Phillipe Rogier said of America on the BBC, "a non-civilization, just a way of life." Yeah, yeah. America's "way of life" values the inventiveness and dynamism of "ordinary" culture; France's celebrates hierarchical cultural authority through a notorious rote-based education. If director Tavernier is encountering thick French students, it just might be France's fault. ▮

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Our Schools and Our Future:...Are We Still at Risk?

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It wasn't a "code orange" alert from the Department of Homeland Security, but twenty years ago the National Commission on Excellence in Education's landmark report, *A Nation at Risk,* was a warning as dire as many had heard from Washington, D.C., in years.

The commission's report hit like a bomb when it declared that the weak performance of America's schools placed the nation itself at risk: "If an unfriendly foreign power had attempted to impose on America the mediocre educational performance that exists today, we might well have viewed it as an act of war....We have, in effect, been committing an act of unthinking, unilateral educational disarmament." More damning was the report's dire warning that the foundations of American education were "being eroded by a rising tide of mediocrity that threatens our very future as a nation and a people."

The commission expected its good advice to cause school boards, legislators, teachers, parents, and students to change direction. It assumed that the education system possessed both the capacity and the will to improve and that the missing ingredient was clear direction.

On the eve of the twentieth anniversary (April 1983) of the report, enough time has passed to assess its impact. The Hoover Institution's Koret Task Force on K–12 Education has just released such an appraisal, *Our Schools and Our Future:...Are We Still at Risk?* The task force finds that the commission, "for all its goodwill, did a better job diagnosing the problem than prescribing an effective remedy."

The task force, having discovered that the tide of educational mediocrity is still rising, unlike the 1983 commission, did not settle for merely diagnosing the problem. Its members call for three major reforms: transparency, accountability, and choice.

To achieve transparency, schools need clear standards and accurate measurement tools. Prodded by the No Child Left Behind Act, the nation is beginning to put these standards and tools in place. Transparency, however, must be connected to accountability.

For accountability to work, parents must be able to choose their schools. Unless children can leave bad schools for better ones, reform will fall short. The school choice movement has recently made significant strides, opening thousands of charter schools, experimenting with school vouchers, and bringing into being an industry devoted to managing public schools for districts and charter school boards.

Choice will be even more effective, the Koret Task Force believes, when schools become transparent and accountable institutions. Accountability systems make school performance clear to the outside world. Parents need such information to make wise choices.

In combination, the three strategies—accountability, choice, and transparency—will transform our education system into one that will, at long last, live up to the principles put forth twenty years ago by the National Commission on Excellence in Education.

— Chester E. Finn Jr.

Paid for by the Hoover Institution, Stanford University.

Interested in reading more?

***Contact us to receive a complimentary copy of chapter one, the* Findings and Recommendations of the Koret Task Force on K–12 Education.**

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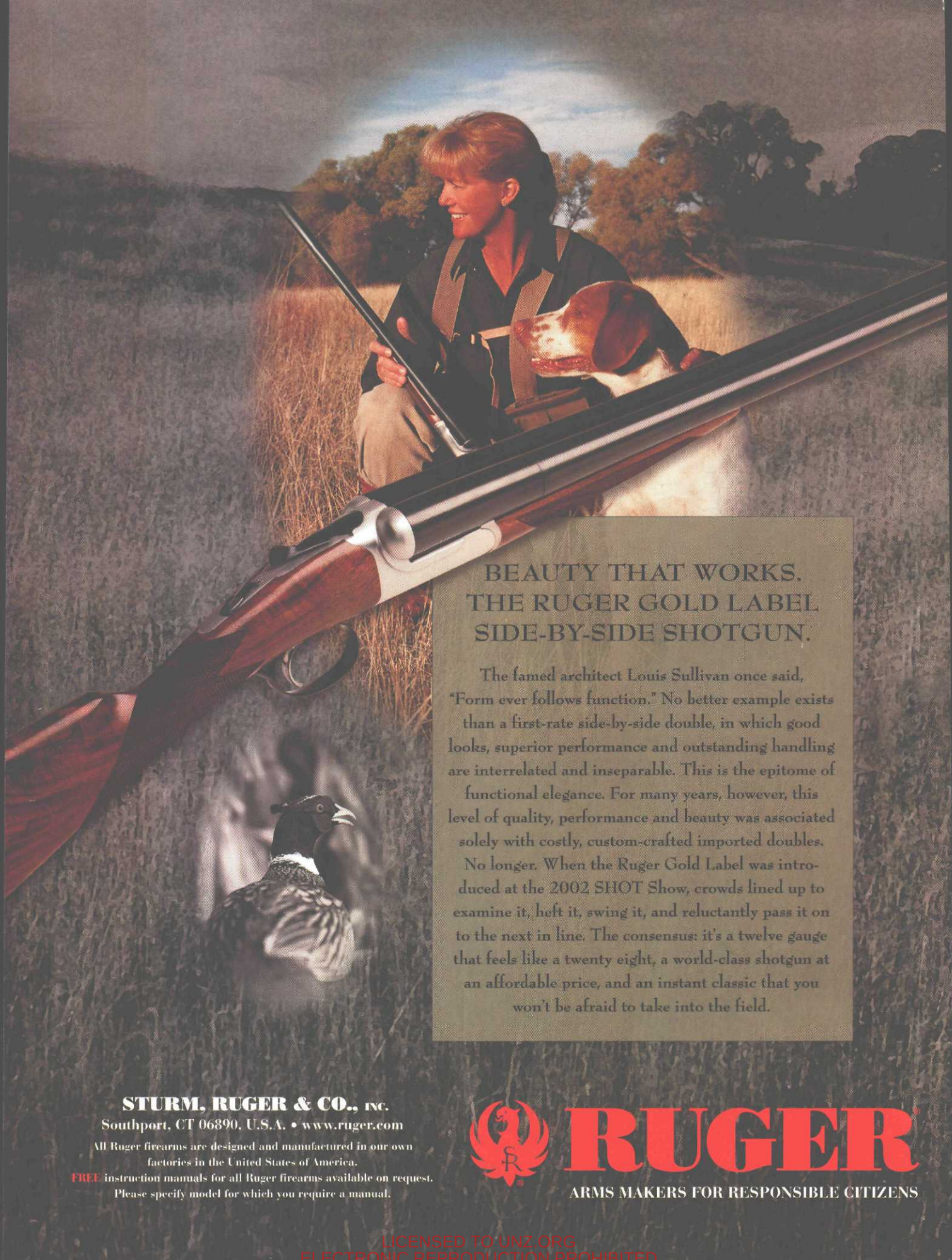

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